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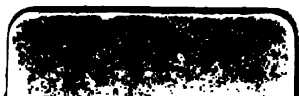
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PILGRIM  
BY  
PERCY  
WHITE



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Stephen Arthur Roberts.



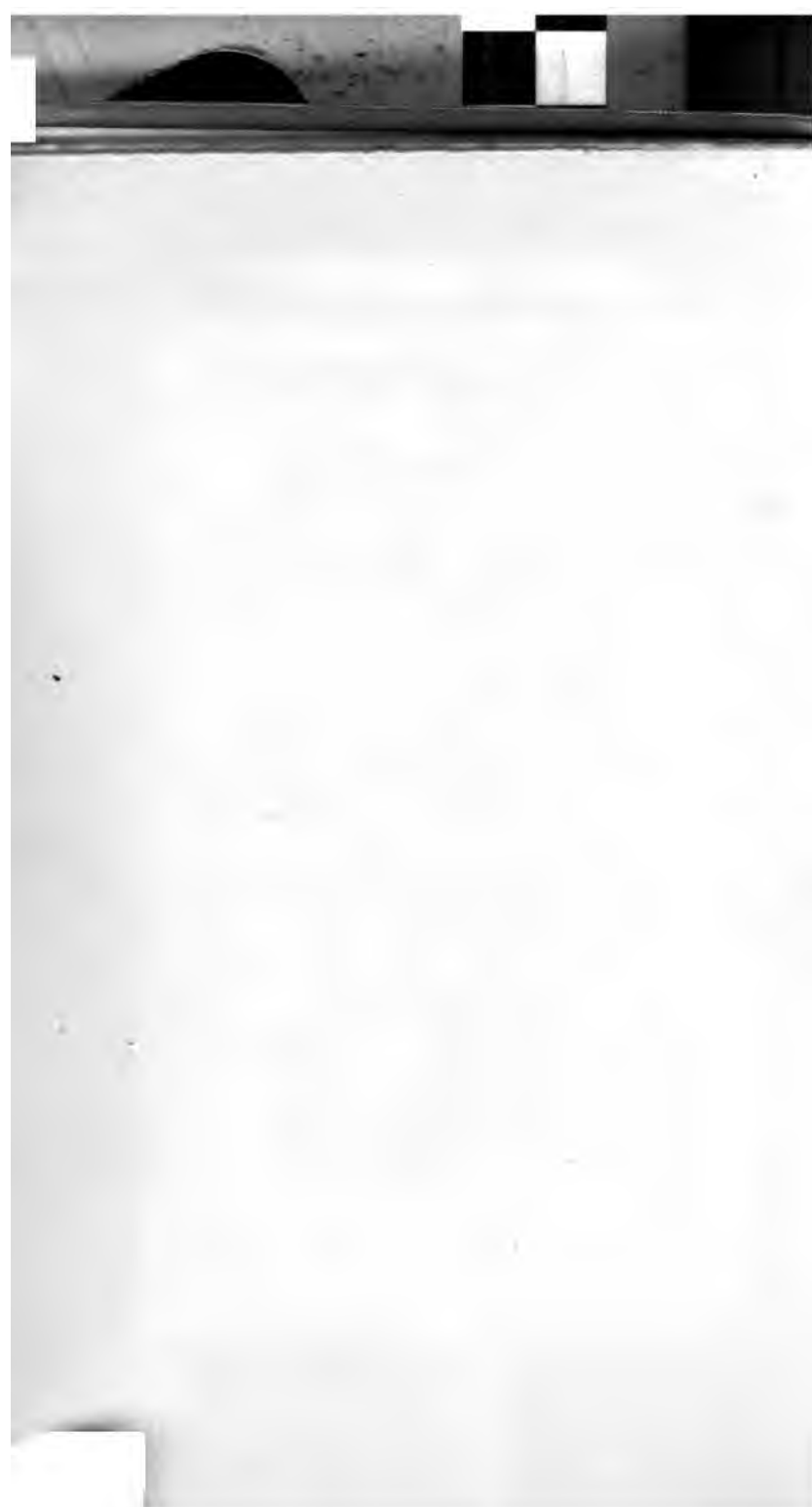




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## A PASSIONATE PILGRIM





# A PASSIONATE PILGRIM

BY

PERCY WHITE

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### CHAPTER I

LIFE is the pursuit, generally the vain pursuit, of happiness. Epigrams, metaphors, philosophies, creeds explain little of its mystery. The theories we form at twenty have exploded at thirty, whilst at forty, unless we happen to be prigs or pedagogues, we have learnt by experience that it is a game or a task governed by no rules save those simple ones deducible from the primal instincts. Complete candour and genteel civilization only obscure the real clue. We are fond of assuring one another that life is made up of compromises and sacrifices, but we never remember that what we invariably compromise and sacrifice is the truth.

The most important fact in life, the instinct we call love, has remained unchanged whilst little else in man's equipment has been permanent. His long and weary progress through the ages



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has modified the rest; but two thousand years of Christianity, and six hundred years of civilization, have left unimpaired the tremendous energy which gives continuity to the human race.

But we have learnt to drape everything either with silks or euphemisms, and even the primitive passion has been surrounded with a tangled wire-fencing of hypocrisy. The rash youths and maidens who try to storm love's stronghold, torn and bleeding from the barbs, retreat, forlorn and dejected, to pretend that "after all what they wanted was not good for them," and of this defeated crew I am one.

There is, in the career of most of us, a period of translucence when the spirit of romance, shining through the opaque covering of conventionality, illumines the innocent and youthful soul. Our eyes, our ears, our senses, our intelligence, are for a vivid space converted into delicate mechanisms for the encouragement of the sweetest illusions. A day comes when the expanding youth finds in the exultant song of the thrush, in the dusky odours of a midsummer's night, or in the charm and colour of words, a mystery and an enchantment. The unhappy victim has, he thinks, acquired a new sense. The world is a garden full of beautiful shapes and alluring fancies. "I will," says the ambitious soul, "get me closer to the great heart of Nature. I will learn why the sun shines and the flower blows,



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and what underlies this mystery stirring at my heart. Why am I happy and expectant?"

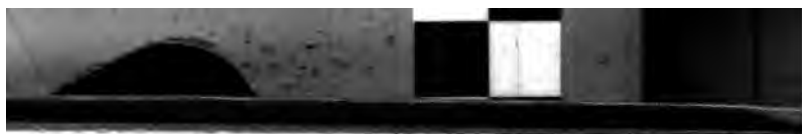
Why are you restless, oh fluttering heart?

Stay! who is that moving yonder through the fragrant gloom of the grove? Is it Artemis, or Aphrodite, or a smooth-flanked, rosy-bosomed nymph?

That figure there under the chequered light is all of these to you. Is not she the embodiment of years of dreaming—the woman whom you love? Do you know now why the world blooms and the thrush sings, and your heart beats; why words fail and senses waver, and vague fear fills you lest the spell break? What force has shot you up above the earth-clouds? O white-winged fancies of innocence! for what are you preparing? Little you care when she comes to greet you, light of step, with the sunshine that glows in your heart gilding her hair. The flowers scatter new fragrance; the odorous undergrowth of the wild wood stirs to her step.

Yet, when she leaves you at the edge of the wood that hides you from envious eyes, the sunshine fades, the thrush becomes a mere earthly bird, and solitude an aching void with your hungry heart for its centre.

To-morrow she will come again, you say, and taking the book you carry as the solace of your fancies, perhaps you read—



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"Sometimes I see before me flee  
A silver spirit's form, like thee,  
O Leonora, and I sit  
Still watching it,  
Till by the grated casement's ledge  
It fades, with such a sigh, as sedge  
Breathes o'er the breezy streamlet's edge."

Or else—

"Come to me in my dreams, and then  
By day I shall be well again !  
For then the night will more than pay  
The hopeless longing of the day."

Later, when the hush of twilight falls on the garden, the woods and the solemn hills, you will watch the pale stars rise with a heart too full even for poetry, and will repeat her name aloud and say, "This is love!"

But the mood changes. The world is dark ; you lie tossing on a sleepless bed, measuring the delights of love and romance by the yard-measure of the practical life to which you are chained. The darkness bristles with questions. "What shall we do? What will become of us? How can it end."

\* \* \* \* \*

There are some memories that modesty compels one to record impersonally. Shame for what has gone by fills in the past the place misgiving holds in anticipation. Has any man ever made a complete confession of his vanities, weaknesses, and follies ?



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Is not the temptation to drape them picturesquely greater than that innate love of truth, of which man exaggerates the strength in order to increase his own sense of dignity? No one whom the world respects despises himself. At best he affects a picturesque unworthiness for an approval which he secretly deems inadequate.

But philosophy, originally intended to simplify life, has ended in obstructing its healthy development, with sophistries and contradictions. Every man, be he a Solon or a Solomon, dwells in the centre of a purely personal circle. His unit of measure, the line drawn to the circumference, has no other test than the experience of his own individual emotions. Thus an unexciting level of dullness on the part of the moralist is frequently associated with considerable popularity, because commonplace minds delight in commonplace estimates.

I have in my mind's eyes my father, than whom no man ever trained his two children more carefully. Something satisfactory is expected to issue from the nursery of a country rectory. The sons should construe the classic authors decently and play cricket by instinct; the daughters should be faultless administrators of parish trifles, blessed with a distinct taste for being bored.

My father, the Reverend Wilfred Blake, was Rector of Kelverton. My mother died when I was



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six years old, and my sister Dorothea four. A Cornish Pengelley, her genealogical tree went back to the Celtic contemporaries of Hengist and Horsa. The strain she introduced into our blood must have greatly improved the breed. The lyrical tendency, traceable in my habit of mind, which has coloured my actions, I am persuaded not unpicturesquely, may be due to atavisms inherited from famous Cornish chiefs, who only missed immortality because they lacked historians. At least the thought is a pleasing one.

My father was an exceedingly worthy man, and it is not for his son to criticize him harshly. He was, as he frequently hinted, a scholar and a gentleman. Evidence of his scholarship still remains in the edition of Horace which he edited. With a keener sense of humour he might have made, perhaps, a more attractive commentator, but then how often humour misleads us! What is socially more dangerous than to see a joke where none was intended, and which therefore ought to be non-existent? When I remember the many agonies of smothered laughter with which this obtrusive sense smote my father's son, I can hardly regret that he was spared a conflict for which his sacred calling unfitted him. But as in these unpretentious annals I intend to sacrifice all things to the truth, even my own dignity, I will confess that he was not incapable of having bored my mother.



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Kelverton Rectory was a charming old parsonage, standing in gardens and orchards planted in the Middle Ages, and a fit home for nurturing a dreamer. A mile or two to the south a long line of treeless hills rises where great herds of black-faced sheep graze, and where the Roman legionaries have left numerous traces of their military presence, unless my father's antiquarian researches have deceived me. Kelverton was a scattered parish, and until agricultural depression descended on our happy fields, the living, which was in the gift of my father's patron and college friend, the late Lord Oakton, was a good one. Lord Oakton was my godfather. He gave me his name, a silver mug, the promise of his future patronage, and a sovereign and a friendly word whenever he came to the rectory.

"This," my father used to say on these occasions, "is your godson Oakton."

"Dear me! how the lad grows, Blake," his lordship would reply.

Here my father, in a voice faintly suggesting discouragement, would observe that I resembled my late mother. And then invariably my aristocratic sponsor closed the discussion with some flattering allusion to my good looks. The Blakes were, I may say are, a handsome family. My sister was a lovely child, and became a beautiful woman, whilst I shared the physical advantages





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which we inherited from both sides of the family.

Looking back, through the long years on that boyish life at Kelverton, I sigh to remember how happy it was before I was sent out into the world of school and college with a scanty purse and fiery appetite for pleasure, to kick against the pricks.

The silver Kolver flowed by the bottom of our paddock, to form below the bridge the bathing-pool where the village lads and I learnt to swim. O little stream, babbling over smooth boulders and golden sands, I have filched the sleeping trout from your waters, I have sat like the idle rustic of the Latin verse, aimlessly watching your gliding wave, or weaving dreams of fruitless things, of fair womanly shapes with tender eyes and voices, and rosy beckoning arms. O little stream! it was by your waters that my real life first began, and that an innocent heart, sending the warm blood tingling through my veins one hot August afternoon, filled my brain with a cloud of emotions whose shadow haunts it still.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was when I was entering on my eighteenth year that my recollections first became vivid, and I commenced the diary on which this simple and uneventful story is based. Till then they are merely pleasant but dim impressions of a hungry,



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active boy, who, although he loved cricket, despised not learning. I had inherited enough of my father's classical tastes to win me a scholarship at Burchester, where three generations of Blakes have cut their names into the hard oak of the Sixth Form-room, without, however, imprinting their personality visibly on the elastic surface of life without the grey stone cloisters.

One sultry August afternoon in my life stands out above all other boyish records. Beyond the southern hills the clouds were gathering, but over pastoral Kelverton the sun blazed in a sky dimly blue. The country-side basked drowsily in the noontide, the cattle stood knee-deep in the water, clouds of gnats dancing between their horns like thin wreaths of grey smoke, whilst I, in flannel clothes, lay on the tree-fringed banks of the Kolver, with a vacant mind unconsciously gathering impressions. The ripe grey-green grasses on the bank above me scarcely quivered in the stillness; the Kolver rippling on by its flowery banks alone broke the sultry silence which it cooled.

As I lay concealed in the thick undergrowth, through the boughs, leaves, and flowering fennel across the stream, I saw a tall, slight girl in a grey dress carrying a book. She found a shady seat on a grassy promontory, where the stream deepened into a quiet pool. Then I grew conscious that a mysterious interest stirred the somno-



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lent afternoon. A dusky sunbeam passing through the flickering leaves fell on her bright brown hair. One bare hand supported her cheek; the other turned the pages. After a while she closed the book, and rising, stood for a moment thoughtfully on the bank. Near her was the heavy plank used by the farm-labourers as a movable bridge. Usually it stretched from one smooth flat boulder to another, leaving a foot of water on either side. But on that day it had been removed on my side, and before a passage across was possible, the plank required readjustment.

Coming to the edge of the water, she tried unsuccessfully to raise it, but the task was beyond her strength. It was then that the spirit moved me. Hurrying to the spot, full of daring shyness, I said: "Let me help you."

She looked at me across the rippling stream, without blushing, and said, "Thank you—it is heavy." But I raised the plank and fixed it carefully on the boulder.

"It is firm now," said I.

Then she stepped across, and accepted the hand I gave her to climb the steep bank. Her hand was soft and white.

"Thank you very much," she said.

And then the spell fell on me. Her grey eyes were soft, luminous, and light-reflecting; her lips red and curved. She carried her graceful head,



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I thought, and still think, like a goddess. Her beauty dazzled and bewildered me.

But lo! she dropped her book. Picking it up to restore it to her, I read Shelley's *Poetical Works*. Then, under a pretence of smoothing the leaves, I glanced at the title-page, and read "Sylvia Carr."

The book seemed a bond of sympathy between us, for I read Shelley too.

Then, with a little friendly bow, she left me, and I watched her until her figure was lost in the folds of the uncut corn through which her path lay.

After a wrapt space, I too walked home, trying to realize what had happened, whilst a small voice within me whispered, "Sylvia Carr, Sylvia Carr!" I looked at the world around me for the change. The poppies in the corn, the waving harvest-fields, the luxuriant summertide, the black swifts cutting aërial figures in the blue, could not answer my question. Something within me seemed to have expanded. Words and remembered verses suddenly found new meanings, and I walked home with my head in a golden cloud.



## CHAPTER II

THE memory is a strange and capricious recorder of past impressions. How well I remember waking with a delightful start on the morning after my meeting with Sylvia Carr! The garden was full of twittering life, and a robin, with his plaintive treble pipe the only coherent songster of the late summer, was weaving an invisible film of soft melancholy over the dark yew-trees. "At last," I said to myself, "I am a man."

It was then fashionable at Burchester for the Sixth to keep diaries. To possess one with a lock and key was regarded as evidence of a refined understanding. So far the idle days had left small record in mine, but now I felt a desire to empty my heart into its pages. Turning to "August 9," I wrote: "To-day I met Sylvia Carr on the banks of the Kolver," but this cold statement of a radiant incident seemed ridiculously inadequate, so beneath it I inscribed the first verse of Shelley's "Hymn to Asia."



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"Life of life ! thy lips enkindle  
With their love the breath between them;  
And thy smiles before they dwindle  
Make the cold air fire ; then screen them  
In those looks, where whoso gazes  
Faints, entangled in their mazes."

Having thus relieved my emotions, as it were by proxy, I dressed and went to cool my newly-born passion in the Kelter.

Ah ! I can even now as I write feel the limpid waters biting my neck, and hear the faint hissing of the current round the boulders. Above was the pure morning sky, below the silver pool reflecting the birch-fringed banks and the fleecy clouds.

"Where have you been, Oakton?" asked my father, when I arrived just too late for family prayers.

"Bathing," said I.

"I hoped you were reading before breakfast," said he. "I always used to."

He was rather fond of "hoping" that I did things which he had been accustomed to do, at what, delusive memory told him, was my age.

"I must beg," he added, "that you will not absent yourself from prayers."

Then my sister helped me to scrambled eggs.

"Remember you must get a leaving scholarship, Oakton, or you cannot go to the University," said my father, eyeing me critically. Then he went out

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through the open window to consult with the gardener about the chrysanthemum beds.

My sister looked placid and pretty and well-regulated, but scarcely in my eyes an ideal confidante for a love story.

"I say, Dorothea!" I began, but then shied at my subject and said, "pass the strawberry-jam."

But when she had handed it to me, it became merely a succulent embarrassment.

The joys of eating and drinking seemed contemptible now, fit only for lower form-boys, and totally unsuited for a man!

Still I helped myself with moderation, and then inquired whether she had ever read Shelley.

"The atheist poet who was drowned?" she said; "I have read the extracts given in the *Treasury of English Song*."

Dorothea's splendid correctness trespassed sometimes on the fringe of female priggishness. But I was burning to talk of Sylvia Carr, and Shelley's poems seemed a dignified route to the subject.

"I had an odd adventure yesterday," I said.

"Where, Oakton?"

"Down by the Kever, near Ilbert's Farm, where the plank crosses the stream. I saw a girl—a lady reading a book."

"What was she wearing?" asked Dorothea, becoming faintly interested.

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"A sort of soft grey dress, brown shoes and stockings and a straw hat."

This description left my sister unimpressed.

"Was she pretty?" she asked.

"Lovely!"

"Who was she?"

"I don't know, but I discovered her name. She wanted to cross the stream, but she couldn't move the plank, so of course I helped her. She dropped the book she was reading. It was Shelley. In picking it up, I accidentally—quite accidentally—read her name."

"What was it?"

"Sylvia Carr."

"The daughter of the new dissenting minister who has come to Kolverbridge. I know her by sight; she isn't bad-looking."

Something turned cold within me. I had inherited the traditional feeling of clerical contempt for dissenters of whom my father spoke—though only, I trust, in the bosom of his own family—as theological impostors. Dorothea, of course, shared his sentiments. Perhaps she saw the look of bleak disappointment, and desired to put my hope out of its misery, for she added: "The Carrs are not the sort of people we can know."

"Miss Carr is the most beautiful—far the most beautiful—girl I have ever seen," said I, with the intention of suggesting that beauty so transcendent





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lowered all barriers, and possibly of snubbing Dorothea, who was held to be the belle of Kelverton.

"She is rather dressy for her station," said Dorothea, who had only put her hair "up" three months ago.

Then in the armoury of my wit I sought a swift epigram to crush her, but finding none, asked her where the Carrs lived.

"In the white house on the Kolverbridge Road," she said. "A pokey little place!"

This was the first cold water poured on my hot passion. It threw back the douche in a burst of angry steam.

"There is no reason to scowl at me," said Dorothea, observing the effect of her words.

"I was thinking what a precocious little cat you are, Dorothea. Because Miss Carr has the misfortune to have a dissenting minister for a father, you talk of her as though she were a house-maid."

"You had better call on her family to express your sympathy," she answered derisively, and went to join my father on the lawn.

And thus the first drop of bitterness was infused into my love-story before it was twenty-four hours old, and with it there mingled that ubiquitous element of the ridiculous which later experience has led me to expect in all the affairs of men.

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In my diary for August 12, I find inscribed as a record of this conversation : "Dorothea spoke like a beast of Sylvia. Jealousy is at the bottom of it!"

There was a path, leading through the corn-fields, passing at the back of our paddock, which struck the high-road opposite Sylvia's house. This my feet haunted, and the harvesters, now busy with their sickles, scarcely stopped working to note my frequent coming.

At night I used to steal across the fields to watch her house, sometimes I saw her in the garden, and one hot night, whilst my heart thumped like a flail, I watched her brushing her long brown hair by the open windows.

A whole week passed before I spoke to her again. But at last the inevitable moment came.

One evening, when the corn stood in sheaves in the twilight and the ghost-moths were flitting along the hedge-rows, I met her face to face, at the narrowest turn of the winding path. The fields were empty; we were alone in a spell-bound world.

"Miss Carr!" said I; "Miss Carr!"

But finding beyond this no form of articulate speech, I stood in the stubble and looked at her beautiful face.

She smiled, and did not resent my audacity. Emboldened I reached coherence.



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"You have not been down to the Kelter since I met you."

"It is rather far," she said.

"Not more than a mile from your house."

"You know where I live?"

"Yes. I have seen you in the garden, and at the window."

"I have seen you pass," she answered. "I wondered why you stared so much."

"Miss Carr, it wasn't idle curiosity; on my honour it wasn't."

"What form of curiosity was it, then?"

"I wanted to see if you were still studying Shelley. I wanted—oh, I don't know what I wanted. Perhaps I thought what a pity it was we could not be friends."

"Well, we can't be."

"Why not?"

"Because your father is the Rector, and mine is the Congregationalist Minister."

"What has that to do with it?"

"Everything."

"Even if my father were Archbishop of Canterbury, I should not let it interfere with my right to choose my own friends," said I, heroically.

"I must go home now," she said; "it is late."

"Let me walk back with you, Miss Carr. It isn't safe for you alone in these lanes. The harvesters are about."

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"Only to the last stile, then."

"Thank you so much. If you only knew what pleasure it gives me."

"I ought not to allow it, Mr. Blake."

"Yes, you ought indeed. It seemed quite dismal in these fields all alone. It is different now."

All my timidity had flown ; a voice seemed to speak for me.

"Are you going to be a clergyman too?" she asked, as we walked slowly side by side, by the thick growth of the hedge-row.

"I don't know ; perhaps I may be."

"I hear it's expected of you."

My heart leapt. Evidently she too had made her inquiries.

"I shan't decide till I go to Oxford."

"I thought you were at Oxford."

"No ; I'm at Burchester."

"At school?"

"Not exactly at school. I'm in the Sixth."

"You don't look like a school-boy," she said.

I felt for the down on my upper lip. It was there safe enough, and gave me courage.

"I am 'in' for the leaving scholarship," I explained, "so I have stayed on longer than most fellows."

We had reached the limit of the fields. Through the tree-trunks, above the hedge-row, the white house loomed across the thickening twilight.

"No further, please," she said.



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"When shall I see you again?" I asked.

"Never," she answered, "if you are a conscientious young man."

"But I must! Will you—I'm ashamed to ask—but, will you come down to the Kelter where I first met you?"

She laughed.

"Isn't it a clandestine appointment, Mr. Blake? Are we not both expected to set examples to the rival sects at Kelverton?"

"We are free to do what we like. Please come, and give me one pleasant afternoon. If I thought it wrong, I wouldn't ask you."

Then she looked at me, and, I think, read on my face the sincerity of my words.

"I will come," she said, "but only because you are a school-boy still."

Then she gave me her hand, let it linger, I thought, an imperceptible space, in mine, and stepping over the stile disappeared, leaving me to enjoy the thrilling moment.



### CHAPTER III

SYLVIA CARR met me by the Kelter again and again, converting that glorious August of visionary youth into an indescribable period of ecstatic happiness.

But before the month was over the troubles began. Both my father and Mr. Carr were members of the Kelterton School Board, and leaders of the rival parties. The debates were acrimonious, and the friction constant. The Rector felt that a dissenter ought to be as much below him in political weight as he conceived him to be in social standing.

The Church party, unfortunately, was weak on the Education Act, and Mr. Carr frequently, "put them right" at the Board meetings. On these occasions my father did not always keep his temper, and "A Scene at the Kelterton School-Board" was a not unfrequent head-line in the county paper. It was painful to me to hear Sylvia's father referred to as that "vulgar dissenting parson Carr," nor was I in a position entitling



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me to take up his defence. Sylvia, on her side, regarded the conflict as a battle of frogs and mice, fought in puny regions remote from her interests.

Before joining her father at Kelverton she had been a student at a high school for girls at a fashionable watering-place, where the head-mistress held advanced views. Huxley and Darwin were her prophets ; she had learnt to swing the agnostic hammer with the fanatical vigour serious women employ in their intellectual enterprises. She was, moreover, the authoress of a small text-book entitled *Evolution for the Young*, which some critic declared "ought to be burnt by the public executioner." Sylvia's father, it seems, pleased with his daughter's progress in carnal learning, and the prizes and praise they won her, failed to discover that the doctrines in which she had been brought up were being destroyed by a gradual process of educational erosion.

As the son of a clergyman I made some effort to counteract the influence of the authoress of *Evolution for the Young*, but discovering that Sylvia was more skilled in "the learning of the Egyptians" than myself, I desisted. Besides, we found little time to discuss these abstruse questions in the excitement of our secret meetings. Sometimes we met among the thick copses through which the Kolver flows ; at others under the stately fir-trees of Wild Heron's Wood ; or, for a rapturous



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moment, behind the privet-hedge of her father's garden in the gloom of the warm night.

If her father or mine discovered our meetings we both knew there would be an end to them, although we were ashamed openly to admit it; so we stole behind hedges, lurked in copses, seeking trysting-places like conspirators rather than happy lovers, whilst the hundred difficulties obstructing the flow of our affections gave them a delicate aroma and romance, which young people, permitted to kiss at their ease in drawing-rooms, are incapable of understanding.

The wind in the leaves, the ripple of the stream, the scent of the honeysuckle, the flicker of the sunshine on the bracken inextricably commingle with the intense memories of that happy August.

When we look back to the troubles of early youth, measuring their intensity in the light of later judgment, it is difficult to regard them seriously, because the ridiculous element assumes disproportionate prominence at the expense of the pathetic side. But although the love-story of a sixth-form school-boy must inevitably be regarded as a joke by all save himself, yet I cannot review that soul-shaking early experience with any of the genial philosophy which the accomplished man of the world is believed to feel for the earliest of his youthful follies. Its humiliation and its triumphs still flutter across my emotions, and raise the





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ghosts of shame and of joy from their uneasy graves.

I cannot remember that my conscience ever opposed any obstacle to these stolen meetings. It has never at any time of my life been a stalwart combatant of my wishes. But nothing can remain undiscovered for long in any family blessed with such a member as Dorothea, who is one of those persons born to "duties." One of them was to keep an eye on me. Encumbered with no weaknesses of her own to wrestle with, she found plenty of leisure and energy to deal with mine. Now, there is an aggressive sort of honesty, ranking only technically with the virtues, because, whilst it is impregnable to temptation, it is dissociated with charity. Of this quality, Dorothea possessed her full share.

In my romantic moods she jarred upon me ; she represented the side of life which never permits us to enjoy to-day because of the doubts of to-morrow ; she had, of course, fully decided that I must be a credit to the family ; there was no reason, she considered, why I should not (after taking Holy Orders) get a mastership at Burchester. Did not some of the house-masters clear two thousand a year ? Her managing sense was abnormally developed. Although she was a year younger than myself, my father frequently consulted her, and constantly bragged of "Dorothea's



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common-sense." He would as soon have thought of taking counsel with me as with his sexton.

I was at this time, I doubt not, a singularly uninteresting companion, and in no mood for the tennis-parties and other engagements in which my sister desired to involve me. The youth who teaches the woodlands to re-echo the name of Sylvia, invariably seems morbidly pre-occupied to his relations.

My love-lorn withdrawal from the puerilities of life did not escape Dorothea's eye, but assuming the appearance of contemptible "moonings" exasperated her. She wanted to know "what had come to me?" whilst I, though wondering at "the great inner change" revealed, as I imagined, in my conduct, replied that nothing had "come to me," as she called it.

"You remind me of 'little Johnnie head-in-air,'" she retorted, reverting to the literature of the nursery in order, I presume, to check the haughtiness of my manner.

"I have promised the Hawthornes to take you over to play tennis this afternoon," she said, as I returned no answer.

The Hawthornes lived on the other side of the parish, and I had an appointment with Sylvia.

"I'm afraid I shall have to disappoint them," said I.



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"Why?"

"Because I have something better to do."

"What?"

"Well—to keep cool."

"How provoking you are, Oakton!"

"You should not make engagements for me without consulting me first."

"Don't be pompous! You're annoyed because I called you 'little Johnnie head-in-air'?"

"I thought it childish."

"Will you come if I apologize?"

"No, I can't."

We wrangled for some time, but nothing would have induced me to forego my meeting with Sylvia, so finally a letter of excuse was sent, and Dorothea's suspicions, already alert, bristled into complete activity.

I took my rod—my excuse for haunting the banks of the Kolver—and hurried off to my trysting-place. I found Sylvia waiting in the group of young birch-trees which had found root on the slanting banks of the stream. Above stretched a wide slope of rugged pasture-land, overgrown with bracken, and coloured here and there with spiral patches of foxglove. The late summer had grasped the countryside with a sun-browned hand; the Kolver rippled quietly round the dry boulders which it covered in flood-time with a truculent amber stream. Sylvia, leaning against





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the silver stem of a slender tree, pretended not to see me coming.

"How glad I am to see you again!" I exclaimed. "To-day is Wednesday. I have not seen you since Monday. A year ago!"

"I have made a great sacrifice for you to-day," she answered. "I have told a story. My father wanted me to go out with him, but I said I had a headache."

"That is a legitimate excuse, not a story," said I.

"I can't quite see the distinction," she answered. "It's too fine for my intellect. Perhaps that is because I wasn't educated at Burchester."

Something of the summer glow seemed reflected in her beautiful, dark grey eyes.

"How beautiful you are!" I exclaimed. "You are a part of the summer. Not a mortal."

"Where did you learn to pay such old-fashioned compliments, Mr. Blake?"

"It isn't a compliment. And please don't call me Mr. Blake."

"What shall I call you?"

"Oakton."

"What an odd name!"

"I'm sorry I haven't a better. You are rightly named, only there ought never to be another Sylvia in the world."

"Why?"



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"Because they can't possibly be lovely like you, and so they would spoil its charm."

I felt I was living in the radiant circle ruled by her eyes. The world beyond seemed a place of no account.

Hitherto I had been too timid to kiss her, but the waves of tenderness that welled up from my heart conquered.

"No," I said, boldly taking her hand and drawing her towards me, "there is only one Sylvia. All the others are mere vulgar usurpers. I love you with all my heart! It is misery to live apart from you. Sylvia! Sylvia! will you marry me?"

"You are so young," she said, "you don't understand what you are asking."

"I am as old as you!"

"But you are still at school!"

"I'm top of the Sixth, and shall get the leaving scholarship."

"But how can we think of marrying?"

She smiled at the idea.

"I don't mean to-day or to-morrow, but soon. If you cared for me you wouldn't laugh!"

"But I can't help seeing things as they are."

"But do you like me, Sylvia?"

"Yes, Oakton. There!"

She kissed me, and then with her ear close to mine, I poured out my heart. What I said I can-



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not remember ; no doubt I bragged of what I would do for her in the world. Our engagement was to be a secret, because my position as a Sixth-form boy might make the contract seem ridiculous.

To me the moment was as thrilling as solemn.

The ferns and tall grasses waved over our heads, the leaves of the birches quivered in the warm air, the monotone of the stream and the drone of a wandering bee made the silence live, whilst I made heroic and impossible promises heedless of the obstructions before us. But though all else has changed and shifted since, though the tender surfaces of feeling have been made callous by friction against the rough edges of the world which clumsily mould men into formal shape, I feel pride rather than shame at the memory of that afternoon of youth, of love, and impossible faith.

Every vow was sincere, every caress a pledge of innocent first love. If innocent happiness be worth winning even for a moment, surely I triumphed in that delightful hour. Even now I cannot see a group of silver birch-trees on the slope of a rugged upland without recalling the brief moment with a pang of tenderest regret.

But as we sat in the shade among the bracken, I promising and vowing heroic things, suddenly through the tree-stems, on the fern-clad slope, I saw Tom Holford seated on a big stone watching us with



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derision in his eyes. And so the bright moment came to confusion, for Sylvia saw him too. Then the sacred moment, losing its sense of romance, became a vulgar and compromising incident. We rose to our feet with scarlet faces.

"I must go home," said Sylvia.

She led the way down the narrow path. I followed, feeling Holford's eyes burning a hole in my back. With a sense of humiliation I remembered how servant-girls and their "young men" kissed in the Kelverton lanes when they thought they were unseen, and how, when detected, vulgar eddies of scandal filtered through the parish. I recalled, too, Dorothea's supreme contempt for these contemptible proceedings.

At last when the group of birch-trees was out of sight Sylvia stopped.

"He saw us!"

"Perhaps he didn't," said I feebly. "Besides, he may not know us."

"I never felt so horribly ashamed in my life," said Sylvia. "What fools we were!"

"We are engaged to be married, so after all it doesn't matter what Kelverton thinks or says about us," I replied defiantly. "It is only a miserable little place. You can't find it on the map."

But the geographical obscurity of Kelverton could not diminish my acrid annoyance. In vain I

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comforted Sylvia, who felt the absurdity of the situation more keenly than I did. To plead as an excuse that she had entered into an engagement with a school-boy seemed to her a prospect full of intolerable humiliation.

"We shall be the laughing-stock of the whole place!" she cried.

"No one will dare to say a word," said I. "I will protect you."

"You can't prevent people laughing. I hate above all things to look silly."

"There isn't anything silly in love," said I, in a voice that faltered.

"Not in books and poetry, but there is in real life. Don't come any further or some one else will see us!"

The white dusty Kolverton road lay in front of us.

"When will you meet me again?" said I, hurt somewhat at her tone.

"Oh, I don't know! It all seems so foolish. Why are you so young, Oakton?"

"Because I can't help it."

"Don't be cross."

"I'm not. Haven't you promised to marry me?"

"Such promises are not serious."

"They are with me. All my life and happiness are in you, Sylvia, yet you can see something ridiculous in it! I don't love like that."





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"I wouldn't wound your feelings for anything," she answered in a softened voice, "but perhaps because I'm really a woman whilst you are not quite a man, I see things plainer. There! forgive me. I'll see you whenever I can."



## CHAPTER IV

SOCIETY of all kinds and of all degrees is deeply interested in any deviation from what it regards as a correct attitude on the part of ministers of religion, or their families.

What is dashing in a subaltern becomes rank ribaldry in a curate. It is rarely, I suppose, granted to one obscure parish to enjoy a scandal of which the parson's son and the dissenting minister's daughter are the origin. But thanks to a wretched farm-servant, this relapse from parochial monotony was the lot of Kelverton.

At first the scandal crept from house to house through the servants ; finally it drifted from the maids to the mistresses. I did not hear of it till it reached my sister, and then the storm burst.

One evening I was enjoying the solace of my still illicit tobacco beyond my father's range of vision from the study window, when Dorothea interrupted my romantic musings.

"What," she exclaimed, "is the meaning of this



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scandal about you and that dissenting man's daughter?"

The evening was dark, but I could read the storm signals in her voice.

"There cannot possibly be any scandal about Miss Carr and myself," said I boldly, but with a miserable sense of misgiving.

"The whole place is talking of you and her," returned my sister indignantly. "Anything more disgraceful I have never heard!"

"You are young, Dorothea, and haven't heard much yet," said I angrily. "But no one in Kelverton shall speak disrespectfully of Miss Carr. Let me tell you that her honour is dearer to me than my life! The man who dares to say a word against her will have to answer for it to me."

The flattering glow of satisfaction from my own manly courage was, alas! brief. My sister soon brought the situation down to a commonplace level.

"Isn't it a little late to go into the heroic?" she asked. "My only hope is that papa will not hear of it."

"Perhaps you have heard that Miss Carr has consented to be my wife?" said I, struggling to maintain the dignity of the situation.

"I have only heard, so far, that Tom Holford saw the parson's son and the minister's daughter



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'a-huggin' and a-kissin' when they thoawt no one was a-lookin'.'"

She imitated the rustic accent.

I scowled at her with a burning face.

"Holford's sister is kitchen-maid to the Hawthornes," she continued. "Mary Hawthorne, who gossips with the servants, heard it. She says it is right I should know, because the story is all over the parish. I shall be ashamed to show my face in Kelverton. And the only excuse for you, Oakton, is that you are a weak-minded school-boy. That Carr girl ought to be ashamed of herself for making a fool of you!"

"If you were a brother instead of a sister, I would thrash you for that," I said passionately.

Then I walked away into the dark shrubbery and left her mistress of the field.

There are some sleepless nights which we never forget. Of one of these I became the victim. Rage, shame, and love, the invisible inquisitors of my restless pillow, wracked me. I fancied I heard Holford telling his odious tale in the coarse vernacular of the country-side. What was to be done? How was the calumny to be met? All the ale-house loafers in the village knew my secret. How long would it be in reaching the ears of Sylvia's father or mine? Outside in the darkness the Fates seemed weaving humiliating overthrows for my pride and dignity, whilst I lay helplessly waiting



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for what was beyond my boyish experience to avert.

All through the night the ruddy, derisive face of Holford mocked me, until a burning desire to wreak vengeance on it mastered the jostling crowd of emotions. In the morning, when I cooled my feverish body in the Kelter, and felt the chill waters closing over me, dim fancies of an early and beautiful end to my woes glimmered in my brain. I thought of myself as of some young Marcellus carried off to a picturesque grave in the flower of his youthful promise, and of Sylvia dying of a broken heart. There was consolation in this!

At breakfast my father said: "Oakton, what's the matter with you? You look as if you had slept in your clothes."

"I have been bathing," said I morosely.

"Bathing, in what?"

"In the pool, of course."

I might have added, "and in despair."

At the other side of the breakfast-table Dorothea, in an ominous and aggressive silence, watched me with a resentful eye.

I was to meet Sylvia in the copse at the back of her house after dark, but there was an interminable day to be passed first. My father, who was going over to Burchester to lunch and dine with the Dean, desired my company to the station. Members of the same family of opposite tem-



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peraments do not invariably enjoy each other's society. We talked as usual of the leaving scholarship.

"We can hardly hope that you will gain one," said he, with anticipatory resignation. "You are too erratic at your work. But if you fail, I don't know what we can do for you, I can't afford to send you to Oxford."

He made these observations whenever we were alone. Repetition had given them an edge of acute exasperation.

"Scholarships are 'fluky' things," said I.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if the other fellows are only slack enough, almost any one may win one."

"I infer, then, that you base your chances on the intellectual feebleness of the other competitors?"

"Yes, and on my Latin prose."

"Your prose must be rather a weak reed to lean upon," returned my father.

But Latin prose, whether at Burchester or Oxford, seemed at that harassed moment, a futile thing, of less importance even than the early autumn tints on the oaks bordering the dusty road.

"Scholarship at Burchester isn't what it was in my day," resumed my father.

"It is supposed to be well up to the Public School average," said I.



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"That's low enough. In my day the big schools aimed at turning out gentlemen and scholars. Now their chief object seems to be to teach idle lads how to play cricket indifferently."

Then as I offered no defence of the modern system, he added: "In my day we used to be proud of the school."

"There were three Burchester men in the last Ministry," said I.

"All of them radicals pledged to disestablishment," he retorted.

"Well, that's better than no record at all."

"I think it worse," said my father, who was a politician only one degree less dissatisfied with his own party than with his opponents.

When his train rolled out of the quiet station I lit my pipe and commenced walking slowly home. It was the first time I had braved local opinion so far as to puff my smoke in its face. But I felt at war with the world, and the pipe was the emblem of my defiance.

Between the village and the Rectory stands a decayed ale-house, known as the 'Jolly Wagoner,' a favourite haunt of rustic Bohemianism. There, on the bench in the porch, the travelling tinker would stop for refreshment, or the tramp might dawdle over his mug of thick beer until requested by the landlord to resume his journey. Here, rumour declared, the local poachers found a ready market



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for their game, and here on Sundays, in an ancient and neglected garden, the dissipated youth of the place tested their terriers on rats which the landlord caught. It was at this disreputable centre of village life that I inflicted the second stain on the family reputation.

On that fatal morning, leaning against the dusty horse-trough, among a group of village idlers, stood Tom Holford, to whose insolent tongue I attributed my present woes. I intended to pass in the dignified indifference becoming my social position in the parish, but suddenly I heard the aggressive cough used by the vulgar youth of the neighbourhood to attract the notice of the other sex.

The savage blood mounted to my brain, and I glanced fiercely at the group. Holford emitted an offensive chuckle, and then all the Furies which had goaded me spurred me into an uncontrollable access of rage.

"What do you mean by that?" I cried, advancing towards him.

"Ho! ho! ho!" he laughed. "It's a crumble what stuck in my throat."

His comrades roared with unrestrained satisfaction at the novelty of this insult.

"You are the miserable cur who has lied about me," I cried.





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"I see you a-huggin' an' a-kissin' o' your gal when you tho'at no one was a-lookin'! 'Twasn't fur me to make no secret o' that!"

"Then take that, you hulking cad!"

I struck him full in the face, and he reeled back against the horse-trough, which saved him from falling.

No one laughed now, but a bystander shouted, "Don't you take that from no parson's son that ever was!"

"Not me," said Holford.

A moment more and we were fighting savagely. Then, in a wicked red light, whilst the trees and hedgerows seemed dancing in riotous confusion, I was conscious of the bystanders watching us with a dully ferocious interest. I think it was the foxy-faced landlord, Curtis, who, with an eye to his licence, shouted, "Stop 'em, some o' you!" but no one heeded him.

Holford was at least three years older than myself, and tough and thickset, but I was taller and more active. At that time boxing was practised at Burchester, and I had acquired considerable skill with the gloves, otherwise the fight might have had a different conclusion. He rushed at me with bull-like impetuosity, leaving his broad red face exposed to my blows. I had learnt to hit straight and hard, and the rage of my accumu-



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lating humiliation strengthened my muscles. Three times I knocked the heavy fellow off his legs, and even now I remember with dim feelings of triumph that a bystander, impressed by my prowess, shouted, "Well hit, Master Blake!"

"Do you want any more?" I panted at last, feeling victory in my grasp.

"Give in, Tom," cried the landlord from the doorstep. "You're licked."

"Not me," growled Holford, rising to his feet, his face gory from my punishment.

One blind rush more on his part, met on mine by a heavy right-hander under his stubborn chin, settled the combat.

This time his friends helped him to his feet.

"I'll chuck it up," he said, "the young 'un's licked me fair and square."

Then a wave of forgiveness rose within me.

"I'll shake hands if you like," said I.

Then we shook hands.

"I didn't mean to make no mischief," said he.

But the throng had imperceptibly thickened during the fight, and as I turned away amid some shouts of applause—for Kelverton always took a sporting interest in an honest fight—I saw, among other familiar faces, Mr. Roberts, a stalwart supporter of the chapel, and a patron of Sylvia's father, staring at me with strong disapproval, and



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beyond his sinister black hat, sitting in the Hawthornes' wagonette, my sister Dorothea looking at me reproachfully over the heads of an excited group of yokels, distress and shame on her pretty face.



## CHAPTER V

I WENT home across the fields.

Fighting at Burchester was regarded as "low," but it was tacitly understood that "a gentleman" might "lick a cad" without loss of dignity under certain circumstances of provocation.

I was anxious to remove the evidence of the fray before seeing our old nurse, Burgess, who adored me with an unreasoning affection, as her "own boy."

Her strong feeling, in fact, was frequently a source of embarrassment, especially when it induced her, as it did in moments of excitement, to address me as "Oakie darling."

Burgess was supposed to look after the linen, but had, on the strength of twenty years' service, appointed herself a sort of family counsellor.

I hurried up-stairs. The glass revealed the wreck of a comely appearance. My face was streaked with blood, and swollen. When I attempted to unbutton my gory collar I discovered that my thumb was uncomfortably sprained. But the feeling of elation which I am persuaded accompanies



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all victories, however base, buoyed me up. If, I reasoned, I was big enough and brave enough to "lick" a fellow like Holford, surely there was not much left in life to be afraid of. So I bathed my bruises, changed my clothes, and then went down to the square oak-panelled room still known as the nursery, because at a remote period Burgess had tended me there before succeeding to the charge of Dorothea.

I now knew how Achilles felt after he had slain Hector, but this extension of experience did not make the prospect of my interview with my sister more agreeable.

Whilst I was waiting for Dorothea, suddenly I heard a rush along the passage, and my old nurse flung herself into the room.

"Oh, Oakie darling! What *is* the matter?"

"Nothing. Shut up, do, and don't make a fuss."

"But your lip's cut and your face is swollen. I believe you've been fighting. And they are all saying such things about you!"

"I met a herd of wild swine in the lane, and they trampled over me. They are the same pigs who are slandering me."

This mysterious tone adopted to repress her familiarity partially succeeded.

"I don't know what you mean by 'wild pigs in the lane,' Master Oakton, but let me bathe your bruises. That right eye will be quite black,"



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"It's an honourable scar, and I won't have it touched. Don't make a fuss."

But, hearing a door open, and guessing it was my sister, "nurse" hurried off to solve the mystery of my battered face with her. Through the open door I heard the excited colloquy.

"Miss Dorothea, oh, Miss Dorothea, what's the matter with Master Oakton? He came in with his face covered with blood, and says it's the pigs in the lane."

"I'm utterly ashamed of him," said my sister.

"Why, what's my dear boy been doing?"

"Fighting like a common man outside a public house whilst all the rabble in the village looked on!"

The accusation was too crushing for my old nurse to undertake my defence at once.

"What dreadful doings, miss! What will your papa say? But some one must have used him very bad. Though hot-tempered from a child, he is most forgiving and affectionate."

Then Dorothea, followed by Burgess, entered the room, and I turned and faced them.

"Well?" said I. "So you're ashamed of me?"

"Utterly ashamed. What a frightful scene! What will papa say when he hears?"

"You needn't tell him, miss," interposed Burgess.

"Tell him indeed!" exclaimed Dorothea. "I trust he may never hear of it. Your behaviour is

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perfectly scandalous. Maude Hawthorne cried, she was so frightened."

"No wonder!—to see his poor face knocked about like that," exclaimed nurse.

"Fancy a clergyman's son fighting outside an ale-house, and in his father's parish!" resumed Dorothea, determined to make an impression.

"I would have rather thrashed Tom Holford somewhere else. But it had to be done here, you see."

"Tom Holford!" exclaimed nurse. "Nasty spiteful, rough fellow! Serve him right! I'm sure he deserved a beating. Oh, Master Oakton, do let me bathe your poor eye. I can see it swelling."

"Merely an optical illusion," said I airily, to annoy Dorothea.

"You must be utterly depraved and bad, Oakton," said Dorothea, losing her temper. "You treat this abominable brawl as a thing to be proud of. No gentleman would behave as you have done."

"Don't talk nonsense. Holford was insolent, and I 'licked' him. You are no judge how a gentleman behaves! Do you suppose I enjoyed fighting a rough outside an ale-house? But it had to be done, and I did it."

"Had to be done, indeed!"

"The whole duty of man isn't contained in the Sunday-school programme. I'm sorry you and



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Miss Hawthorne saw me, but it had to be done, I tell you. It's cant to pretend it's disgraceful to lick a cad."

"You have disgraced the family, and nothing you can say can alter that," returned Dorothea, with an obstinate look about the corners of her mouth and the pupils of her eyes.

"Since you have expressed your opinion sufficiently on the subject, Dorothea, we might drop it," said I.

"Do let me bathe your eye with hot water, Master Oakton," insisted nurse, looking reproachfully at Dorothea for what she considered her "want of feeling."

"All right, nurse," said I. "Fire away, if you really think you can get it down."

Whilst Burgess fetched the basin and sponge, Dorothea sat in the high-backed chair and watched us resentfully.

When nurse had given my damaged eye the final touch and had left us to fight it out, Dorothea again resumed the attack. I am convinced that even at that early age the prospect of a sister-in-law of dubious social station, in whose choice she had no voice, caused her extreme uneasiness.

"Has it never occurred to you," she began, with an exasperating air of moral superiority, "that you are acting deceitfully?"

"I have already told you," I answered, "that we





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consider it inconvenient to announce our engagement. That's why we keep it to ourselves."

"Your plan of kissing in the byways and fighting in the highways hasn't been quite successful," she retorted maliciously.

"I expected you would say that," I answered, determined to keep my temper, "because you love saying beastly things. If you were in a hobble I should try to get you out of it."

"I am helping you, only you are too stupid to see. I want to put an end to this scandalous nonsense. The idea of being in love before you have left school! It's the most absurd thing I ever heard. Oh, you may scowl at me. I'm not frightened. You can't fight with me as you did with that man outside the public-house."

"Dorothea, you are ripening for a shrew, but I would rather you didn't practise on me. I shall go and fish—and not be in to lunch."

"Fish! I know what your fishing means."

But I refrained from retorting, and went to the little room at the end of the passage which we called "the work-room," where Burgess mended the family linen.

"Nurse," said I, "will you please cut me some sandwiches? I am going to fish, and shall not be in to lunch."

"But there isn't fish to catch," she returned incredulously.



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"You never know till you try," said I. "Please get me some sandwiches."

"Oh, Master Oakton! Isn't this fishing an excuse for something your father wouldn't approve of? Not going to be in to lunch? There's such a nice pigeon-pie, too."

"I think I prefer sandwiches and solitude to lunch with my sister to-day."

"I always said Miss Dolly was a little wanting in feeling," said nurse. "But I dare say she's worried about you."

"Nurse," I answered with dignity, "you must understand there are things a man doesn't even consult his father about. So please give me some sandwiches."

Burgess laid aside her work, and rose from the old rocking-chair in which I could remember her rocking Dorothea to sleep, and looked at me and said—

"You are a man grown, but you mustn't be so headstrong over this courting they're all talking about. There isn't a young woman in Kelverton good enough for you to look at, not even that Miss Hawthorne up at the Hall."

"Damn it!" I cried.

"Oh, Master Oakie! Master Oakie!"

"Well, you make me swear with all this beastly gossip about 'courting,' as you call it! Get me some sandwiches, and please don't talk rot."



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"Ham or tongue?" said nurse reproachfully.

"Tongue," said I. "Please put them on the hall-table."

Solitude is the comfort of the harassed lover, so the "Passionate Pilgrim" of Kelverton parish sought, "the woods and streams among," the sympathy which the practical work-a-day world denied him.

I threw a fly occasionally, but the languid trout refused to rise from their lurking-places under the shadowy banks in the lazy pools. Alas! poor dull fish, they wanted the rush of the flood-water from the peaty hills to restore their energy, just as I needed the waves of the outer world to give me sanity and understanding.

Youthful love is fed as much on introspection as on sense of beauty. One year ago I had caught, with a splendid thrill of excitement, the four-pound trout which had haunted the big pool, and baffled the expertest rods of the village. To-day, that triumph seemed insignificant. A trout, even the gamest and biggest, was but a fish, and the cunning which killed him found no honoured place in the romantic armoury of love. That big trout became a fixed point by which I could measure the mental changes.

"This," thought I, "must surely be manhood."

It is strange how the vision of a girl can give a lad a new perspective of life!



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The sky was a dim blue. There was thunder in the air. Far away on the southern horizon a bank of clouds was standing solemnly above the hills. My mind had had its storm. The tumultuous passions the fight had raised had mingled a strange feeling of apathy with my emotions. The energy with which my mind kindled images was relaxed. The explosion of savagery had begotten an indefinite feeling of shame. A patch of yellow mallows on a dry bank, or the golden brown of the dying bracken on the upland, catching my gaze, riveted it, and turned the stream of thoughts into channels alien and remote to the truculent combative instincts. So the long hours passed, the stream babbled, and I ate my sandwiches without knowing whether they were ham or tongue. Occasionally a bitter thought broke my calm, shaking the dim leafage of my musings as the sultry movement of the air shook the yellowing foliage of the birches, but after a momentary spasm the quiet procession of fancies resumed its movement.

"To-night," I thought, "I shall see Sylvia. Till then, patience and rest."

And so I sat and pastured my mind on that side of classical literature passed over in discreet silence in school text-books, but which I had absorbed without ever realizing before its human significance. Heroines ceased to be cold shadows, and became warm, lovely, and gracious symbols to



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excuse, to encourage, and to measure the fervour of my own passion.

Love, the glowing thread of literature, had led me to the magic circle, and I too had become one of the initiated and worshipped at the eternal shrine, only the tragic element with me was replaced by the bitterness of the absurd. Dido, Marguerite, Juliet, and the rest of them, played with life and death. My risks were very different in kind! However sincere and absorbing my passion, it could not quite destroy my sense of proportion. Dido feared not to die upon the funeral pyre, nor Juliet on Romeo's dagger, but I?—well, I dreaded my father's voice exclaiming, "What a young fool!"

Burchester and the "Sixth" could not adorn a true love story. This thought thrust itself on me, chilling the exultant glowings of my heart. Was mine the sort of romance to be blazoned through the parish? Yet on the whole I felt rather triumphant than unhappy whilst the day passed in a dreamy conflict, in which I more than half conquered the ugly-headed reasons which whispered, "Oakton! every one will call you an ass!"

I had no intention of going home until after my appointment with Sylvia. The little copse behind her house where we were to meet had become a hallowed spot.

Long before it was dark enough for Sylvia to



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join me there unobserved, I stood beneath the dusky shade listening to the pipings of a belated robin. When he was silent a feeble star appeared over the firs, and a bat fluttered between the pale spaces of the boughs.

Robins I knew had twittered, stars peeped out in soft autumn skies, and bats fluttered across their fading light for endless ages before I was born, yet I doubted whether the heart of any other youth had been so stirred by these simple natural movements before.

But suddenly at the end of the little wood through the red boles of the tree-trunks I saw Sylvia hurrying to meet me, and read the signs of agitation in her haste.

"This is pleasant!" she exclaimed when in speaking distance.

"What?"

"Why, this fighting!"

"You have heard, then?"

"Yes, with the rest of the parish."

She stopped opposite me in a cloud of trouble and annoyance. Then seeing my bruised face said—

"Your eye is black—quite black."

"It's nothing."

The fight which I considered ought to have added an heroic element to our meeting had produced an opposite effect.



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"My father has gone to Mr. Roberts' this evening," she said; "I feel frightened when I think what they may talk about."

"Mr. Roberts saw the fight," said I. "He was prying about like a virtuous crow."

Roberts was the well-to-do retired grocer, and a pillar of local dissent. He dwelt in a new red-brick villa on the Kolverbridge road, where he frequently dispensed lavish "teas" to his sect.

Sylvia shuddered.

"You most unfortunate boy!" she exclaimed disconsolately.

"Well, he saw me, and it can't be helped. But who told you about the fight?"

"Sarah."

Sarah was the servant who acted as a sympathetic scout. "She heard in the village that you had fought Holford about me, you silly overgrown school-boy. The scandal is just doubled now. Every one in Kelverton must hear of it."

"I'm not ashamed."

"But I am."

"Sylvia!"

"Of course! What a fool I shall look! Just think of it!"

"Nothing matters when you really care for any one," I cried.

"Nothing matters! Do you expect me to enjoy this humiliating muddle? You ought to have



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prevented it. Just imagine what will be said! Your friends will laugh at me for making a fool of a school-boy. Oh, Oakton, why are you not a few years older? As it is I should like to run away and hide."

I writhed.

"You can't love me, Sylvia," I cried. "If you did you would defy everything for my sake as I do for yours. And trust me too."

"Trust you to do what?"

"To win a place for you in the world!"

"When? In ten years' time? We shall be twenty-eight then. What am I to do in the mean time? Live here at Kelverton? What a prospect! Besides, although you think you like me now, the feeling won't last. It couldn't. It isn't natural."

This was not at all the love of which I had been dreaming, but her face under the darkness of the wood belied the matter-of-fact sentiments.

"Love with me is eternal!" I exclaimed. "So deep and vast that I can't express it. You are the whole of my world. People talk about being born again. I know what that means now. I have been born again, and in a flood of white blinding light of fire and dew. And yet you talk of the 'feeling' not lasting!"

I spoke vehemently, with heaving breast and quivering lips, vainly trying to express the un-





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utterable yearnings that lay on my heart. The colour mounted to her face, and forgetting her misgivings for a moment, she crept into my arms and laid her head on my shoulder.

"Do you love me like that?"

"More, a thousand times. I can't reach it, express it, or explain it."

But as we nestled together under the firs, a voice at the end of the grove frightened us apart.

"Miss Sylvia," it cried, "Miss Sylvia, your pa's come home."

"It is Sarah calling," she said nervously.

"He's home, miss," said the girl, "and calling for you. He seems upset-like, and I'm afraid he's heard something."

"Let me come and see," said I, seeing her shrink at the prospect before her.

"No, you will only make it worse. I don't want him to think I have just left you."

"Be brave!" I whispered.

Sylvia made no reply, but left me, to breast the first wave of the storm.



## CHAPTER VI

WHEN I stepped from the dark garden into the lamp-lit hall half-an-hour later, Dorothea met me.

"Papa's home," she said. "He knows everything."

"Everything?"

"Yes, the fighting—Miss Carr—all of it."

She seemed relieved.

"You sneaked, I suppose."

"I did nothing of the kind. Mr. Hawthorne, whom he met at the station, told him. You are to go into the study."

I stood on the worn door-mat looking at her.

"I suppose you hardly expected it could go on for ever," she continued. "It is the best thing that could happen."

"What is?"

"To be found out in time."

My head, which had been in a whirl, became clear again, the emergency spurring my faculties into activity.



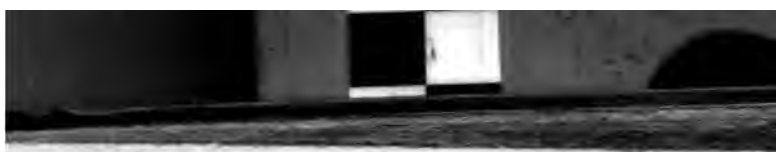
## A PASSIONATE PILGRIM

"I'm not the only one in this family 'found out.' You are too. Now I know that you are a selfish, interfering little prig!"

She answered my scowl with a toss of her head, and then, with a contemptuous flick of her skirts, went up-stairs, whilst I braced my nerves for the second fight that day. My victory over Holford encouraged me. Still I shrank from the engagement, like a general who has no artillery. The conflict seemed too unequal.

Once in my early boyhood my father had flogged me, and as I hesitated outside the study-door, I recalled the scene with almost sickening vividness. I had stood still, full of wicked thoughts, whilst he had struck me across the shoulders and back with a cane. "I hope," he said, when he had finished, "that this is the last time I shall be called upon to chastise you." But I silently walked out of the room, an unsubdued young savage with rage in my heart. Perhaps the look he read on my face convinced him that my temper ill-suited me to the cane, for the flogging was never repeated.

But the victory I had regarded as mine, because I had never shed a tear, although I had lain awake in a furnace of shame for most of the following night. I had, unconsciously, I think, never quite forgiven him, and the spark of smouldering resentment the recollection fanned, encouraged me to



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stand my ground. "Don't funk it," urged the voice of defiance, as I turned the handle.

My father, standing with his back to the mantle-piece, waited for me with a flushed face.

"Well, sir!" he said, frowning across the green-baize table.

"Dorothea told me you wanted me."

"Wanted you! I'm wondering rather what on earth I shall do with you. You are an abominable nuisance in my parish. I'm not sure whether you are a young fool or a young scamp, but I'm inclined to think you are both."

"I thrashed Holford because he deserved it," I said. "And as for my being a fool or a scamp, I should permit no one but you to say it."

He looked at me across an eddy of angry astonishment.

"As for this blackguardly, and—eh—unchristian fighting, ungentlemanly as that is, there may be excuses, but there are none for this—I'm at a loss for a decent phrase—for this going on with the dissenting girl."

"If you are referring, sir, to my relations with Miss Carr, you are unjust."

"Your relations with Miss Carr! How old are you, sir?"

"Eighteen."

"Have you no shame?"



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"I have nothing to be ashamed of. We thought it better not to tell you of our attachment."

"Attachment? What does this nonsense mean? It seems that I'm blessed with a fool for a son."

Then in somewhat unclerical language—for wrath and excitement suggest perfectly natural modes of expression—he proceeded to give me the version of my love passages as rumour had conveyed them to him.

"What with kissing behind hedges and fighting in front of ale-houses, you are rapidly making the parish too hot to hold its vicar. I suppose I ought to be thankful that you didn't make love to the servants under my own nose. Precocious boys like you begin like that. You are not a fit companion for your sister after your disreputable behaviour in company with this dissenting minx——"

"You shall not say a word against her. No one shall, not even my own father!" I cried, and as my voice rose above his, the room seemed filled with unholy vibratory noises which contrasted strangely with the serene light which fell from the lamp on the shining backs of the books, marshalled in their quiet ranks.

"Silence, sir! Would you dictate to me in my own house?" he thundered. "Ungrateful boy! how dare you forget the respect due to your father and to his sacred calling!"



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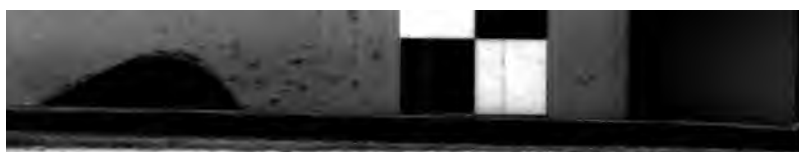
"I'm not forgetting my respect," I cried in a whirl of defensive fervour. "It is you who are forgetting what is due to the young and innocent lady who has consented to be your son's wife."

This shot falling clean into my father's camp for the moment silenced his guns. When he had recovered a little he lowered his voice.

"Then go and marry her, sir. Ask her father to read the service over you. You're more than fourteen, and the chapel is licensed. Oh, what a young idiot the dissenting minx has made of you!"

"Miss Carr," I retorted, "is perfectly blameless. She is the most beautiful, charming young lady—and the most refined—that I have ever met. It is not her fault that she is a dissenter. And as for marrying at once, we know perfectly well that is out of the question. We are young, and can wait!"

"'Young, and can wait.' Oh, you are young enough! Listen to me, sir. This foolery must end. Understand that. It is your youth and unlucky—ah—ah—precocity, sexual precocity—which has enabled this young person to inveigle you into an—absurd position. In mixing yourself up with this dissenting family—love-making and kissing about the lanes like a plough-boy, you cover my family with ridicule. Now you are in a frame of mind resembling hysteria more than



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anything else. That is your only excuse. Fortunately you return to school in a few days. I will write to the head-master and request him to take you in hand. To-morrow I shall see this girl's father. If, after this, you insist in your folly, I will have you understand that you must find some other place than your father's house for playing the fool in!"

There he stopped and frowned at me. But the memory of all the persecuted lovers of romance and history buoyed me up. Was not the brutal opposition of parents the badge of all our ardent tribe? So with becoming dignity I said—

"I have given my word to Miss Carr and intend to keep it, and to marry her whenever I can. My mind is positively made up, although I much regret the engagement is opposed to your wishes. I am no longer a boy. In little more than two years hence I shall be of age."

We looked at each other across the table, which my father had struck frequently to emphasize his reproaches.

"This then is open rebellion. I must consider how best to deal with it. Oblige me by leaving the room."

I turned to go, but a softer feeling made me stay.

"Father," I said, "can't you understand that I love her with all my heart? Did you never love



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any one? And where am I to go to if I leave your house? To the dépôt at Burchester for a soldier?"

Something in my voice seemed to touch him.

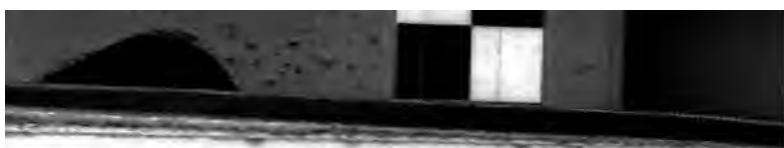
"The whole thing is preposterous," he said. "Leave me. I have told you what I think."

So I left him, feeling that the customary boyish ground on which I stood was crumbling about my feet.

On the stairs I heard the rustle of Dorothea's skirts, and knew that she had been leaning over the banisters listening to our excited voices. Her door closed with a hollow unfamiliar flap.

Outside, through my open window, I could hear the rain steadily falling on the dry leaves, whilst the wet smell of the damp garden filled the room.





## CHAPTER VII

WHEN I awoke from the deep sleep which Nature, in season of trouble and perplexity, squanders on youth at the expense of maturer years, my blinking consciousness spun round giddily in the white light of reality. Just as the stiffness in the regions of the right eye told me it was black, and reminded me of Holford's fists, so a dreary sense of moral outrage oppressed the pride bruised by my father's words. The waking point is not an heroic moment. Pride, the spur of courage, has lain all night in the quiet abysses of sleep. The spirit of combat then burns a dim spark, half quenched in the melancholy grey of the dawning.

During the night heavy rains had fallen. The sunflowers were bent in the garden-mould. Wherever a bird stirred in the trees, the balanced drops on the drooping leaves fell in a shower. Beyond this faint patter of Nature's activity, and the febrile chirpings of the sparrows in the eaves, all was still. Out at the limits of the stubble-fields the tall elms



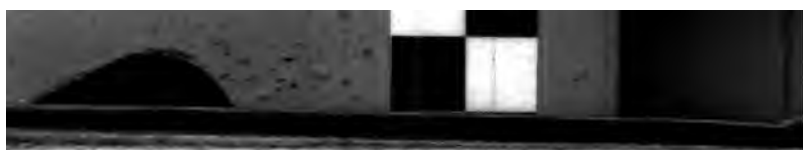
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seemed propping up a falling sky. But I drew sullen sympathy from the gloomy morning. In the dank air to visit the bathing pool became a stern duty rather than a quivering delight. The night had made the Kelter's swollen stream faintly visible in the mid pool and given deeper murmurings to its flow. In the overhanging bank rose three "coigns of vantage" for diving. A rough ledge of rock, menacing evil things to erring feet, must be cleared by the plunger from the highest. For a bather at war with circumstance the boldest leap was fittest. To spring into the grey water at the risk of a fractured skull made me worthier of Sylvia's love—especially before breakfast on a chilly morning.

Ah! I can even now feel the dampness circling around my lithe youthful body as I stand poised to spring. Then a rush of air and a cleaving of tingling waters with the unforgettable flavour of peat, and I find myself swimming across the pool wondering with dread "what shall I say to my father?" A whole Niagara of waters could not wash away the menace of that day.

But the evil day behind whose black shadow stratagems are weaving to roll our pride in the mud, differs not visibly from the unnoticed units of time when we feed and doze in apathetic comfort.

I returned across the wet fields to my father's



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house, feeling like an intruding hostage or a reluctant captive.

The battle-field of yesterday must be crossed, strewn with feathers torn from Affection's breast and wings. The parental arrows still clung to my flesh. "*Haeret lethalis arundo*" whispered soft Virgil's voice, tender with two thousand years' pity. My father was "blessed with a fool for a son." I was "rapidly making the parish too hot for its vicar." My peerless Sylvia was "a dissenting minx." The reproaches sprung from the hot dust and stung me again with renewed poison.

Prayers first had to be faced—at which the servants sat in respectful chairs, paying mechanical devotion with the family. A strange tension filled the room in spite of the friendly odour of fried bacon wafted from the kitchen. Dorothea's mouth was prim and pursed; my father's face clouded and averted. Nurse alone bent on me gentle brows, dismayed a trifle at her darling's bruised eye, the badge of victory and disgrace.

A man of commanding aspect, my father was respected in his household. His voice was round and loud. A less respectful ear than a son's might have heard the ring of metal in it. A brazen voice? No! but sonorous unfalteringly, it could fill the dimmest aisles of a church with dignity. That morning as he read prayers with the emphasis the family crisis perhaps needed, I became conscious



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of the imperfections filial piety should have hidden. "We beseech Thee," he prayed, "to send down on every member of this household power to conquer pride of the flesh, and arm us all against the lures and luxuries of folly."

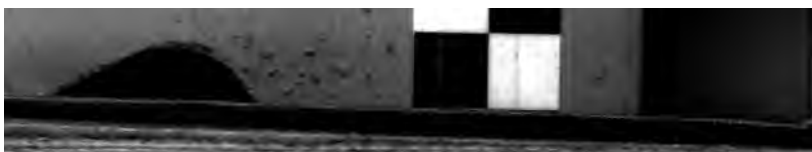
This divine request aroused my suspicions. Had my father, I wondered, interpolated the paragraph on my especial behalf in a homily of vaguer and narrower significance?

But the ceremony ended. The fried bacon and urn made their entry. In silence Dorothea poured out my tea. In further silence my father placed my portion on a plate, but upon discovering by touch that it was the hotter, removed it to one indifferently warmed, and better suited to the claims of a rebellious son. That he should pay such minute respect to his own comfort on so tragic a morning struck me as singular. Evidently the earthquake that had shattered me had scarcely shaken him.

"When you have finished breakfast, Oakton," he said, "you will oblige me by going into the study."

I went there prepared to renew the encounter, but with other weapons. The long night's sleep, the damp autumnal morning, the cold bite of the Kelter had cooled my blood. I was no longer blind to my father's views.

In a few minutes, after discussing, I doubt not, my case with Dorothea, he joined me.



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"Sit down," he said.

I took a chair opposite him. His back was to the window. Over his shoulder I could see the wet garden, the tall privet hedge, and lo! veering above it, in motion, a broad, soft, black felt hat whose shape denies all fleshly things by its aggressive unsmartness, and which, whilst claiming so little outside sect, advertises so much within.

I knew the head that unpresuming covering crowned. The duel must now become triangular.

"Well, sir," commenced my father, "you have had time to reflect over your conduct."

"Yes," said I, "but I think Mr. Carr is coming."

As I spoke the hat disappeared in the porch, and the bell rang.

My father coloured and bit his shaven lips.

"This is a pretty mess," said he. "I would rather you had made a fool of yourself with a servant-girl."

He looked like one who knows his enemy is at his gate, and went to meet him.

The meeting in the passage darkened by thick garden foliage, and within my earshot, seemed to me wanting in dramatic dignity.

Mr. Carr muttered vaguely his apprehensions that his appearance might cause surprise.

"Not a bit of it," said my father, "I expected it. But, for goodness' sake, let's have as little fuss as possible."



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The minister had dressed for the occasion in pious broadcloth. His whole aspect suggested that he regarded the situation as immensely serious.

What had this brown-bearded little man with the excitable blue eyes said to his daughter?

"This is my son," said my father, indicating me with a wave of his hand, as though I were of minor importance in the affair.

Mr. Carr looked, and admitted he knew "the young gentleman by sight."

Then we all sat down, and my father without further manœuvring commenced—

"I infer that your daughter has deceived you in the same manner as my son."

"In so far as I had no idea that this young man was paying court to her—yes," returned Mr. Carr.

"Please don't forget the lad's a school-boy," said my father.

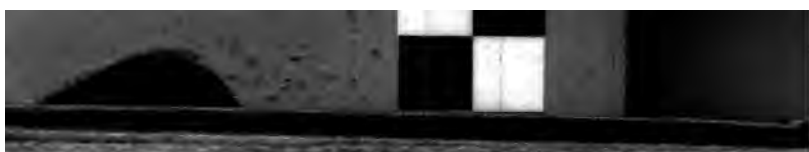
Mr. Carr glanced at me, and said—

"He scarcely looks like one."

"Oh! he's precocious enough! However, he is only eighteen, and returns to school next week, when I hope we shall see the end of this folly."

But the attempt to bludgeon me out of my love and dignity, with the weight of my youth, swiftly warmed my blood.

"There is one thing I must say," I insisted, turning to Mr. Carr.



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"No more heroics, for goodness' sake!" cried my father irritably.

But I refused to be stopped.

"I wish to tell Mr. Carr that his daughter is blameless. I am deeply attached to her, sir; she has consented to be my wife,—some day. We desired to keep our engagement secret until I was in a position to think of marrying. That's all I have to say."

"You see the sort of sensible youth this is!" said my father, looking across me contemptuously to my other judge.

"My daughter told me a similar story," said Mr. Carr. "But I should like to spare the feelings of this young man."

"Oakton, leave the room," said my father peremptorily. "We can't discuss this foolery whilst you're in it."

"Very good, sir," said I, rising. "Only wished Mr. Carr to understand my position. Whatever is decided, I regard myself as solemnly engaged to Miss Carr."

"Hold your tongue, sir, and leave the room," cried my father.

"I'm going, sir. But you understand, Mr. Carr."

"Yes, yes," said he, blinking his eyes uneasily between the waves of excitement that his coming had stirred.

"The more you explain, the sillier you look,"



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thundered my father. "Leave us, for goodness' sake!"

And to suppress further expostulation, he rose and almost shouldered me into the passage.

Dorothea was sitting in the room opposite and with the door open, trying to hear what was said.

"What did that dissenting man want?" she asked.

"To claim me as a son-in-law!" I replied viciously.

"No!" cried she aghast. "You *have* put your foot into it! Now I suppose there will be a breach of promise or something. The Carrs are a nice class of people to be mixed up with! Luckily you haven't a penny and can't marry. And of course the girl hasn't. These dissenting people never have a sou unless they're tradesmen."

"Miss Carr has a rich aunt at Kolverport," said I maliciously.

"I doubt it," said she. "If she had any prospects at all, it isn't likely she'd engage herself to a school-boy!"

But the voices from the adjoining room, now raised to an angry pitch, interrupted us, and I guessed the rival ministers were apportioning their children's blame.

"That man is annoying papa," said Dorothea. "I'm not surprised. I wouldn't have seen him in





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his place. Of course he will insist on holding you to the engagement. It will be a big lift to people of their class."

"Miss Carr is much better bred and educated than any of us," said I.

"You're an excellent judge of that!" sneered Dorothea.

But before I was ready with a retort the door opened, and my father shouted: "Oakton, come here!"

I joined the scene of conflict, reading on the flushed faces of the combatants evidence of the heat of the controversy.

"Mr. Carr agrees with me, though for different reasons, that this nonsense must stop, and that the talk of an engagement in which one of the contracting parties is a school-boy, is too absurd to be thought of. You, sir, return to your studies next week, and as Miss Carr has already left Kelverton, the silly affair will, I hope, soon be forgotten in my parish."

"Sylvia gone!" I exclaimed, my heart sinking. "And without a word to me."

"She did give me a letter for you, but I don't know whether your father would wish you to receive it," said Mr. Carr.

My father assented grimly.

"The lad can have it. It can't make any difference in the long run."



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A letter was handed to me, addressed to Oakton Blake, Esq., and beautifully written.

"DEAR MR. BLAKE," said the heart-blistering note, "I am very sorry for what has happened, for your sake, as well as for mine. It has placed me in a most unpleasant and awkward position. In moments of thoughtlessness I let you imagine what must be forgotten. I am anxious not to say anything unkind, but you must understand, now you have been brought face to face with it, that an engagement between us is out of the question. For what has occurred I accept the main responsibility, since my knowledge of the world, however limited, is far greater than yours. The excuses that I might make for my conduct are all of them flattering to you ; to offer them would be to make a still greater sacrifice of my pride.

"I now, with every affectionate wish for your success in life, wish you farewell.

"SYLVIA CARR."

Sylvia's words oozed on my intelligence like a burning acid.

"What a letter! What a horrible letter!" I cried, turning on Mr. Carr, wild with misery. "I believe you made her write it."

"Hush, sir," said my father, "it merely shows the girl has recovered her common-sense."



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"I did nothing of the kind," said Mr. Carr.  
"She wrote of her own free will. I have no idea what she has said."

"Will you swear you did not compel her?"

"Swear, sir? I'm not accustomed to swear. But you have my assurance."

"Let me see her then."

"Impossible. She has already left home to put an end to the scandalous gossip. It's not often I have the pleasure of being in agreement with your father, but we are of one mind in this."

"Except that you take it too seriously," said my father, trying to frown me into silence.

"She can't have meant it," I cried, seeking in the memory of the last few days rays of comfort for the outrage on my heart.

My father intervened.

"Nonsense, sir. We have had more than enough of this. Don't make a scene. She has no further desire to share your folly and disobedience, and has the sense to say so. The whole thing is most distasteful to me, and I doubt not to Mr. Carr."

"It is most painful to me," assented Mr. Carr.  
"Especially as some of those who sit under me question my parental supervision. However, the conduct of both of you appears foolish rather than dishonourable, and I confess I am inclined to view



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this weakness—this eminently human weakness—more leniently than your father.”

Mr. Carr having thus delivered himself, rose to go. The phrasing of the speech annoyed my father, who donned his heaviest armour.

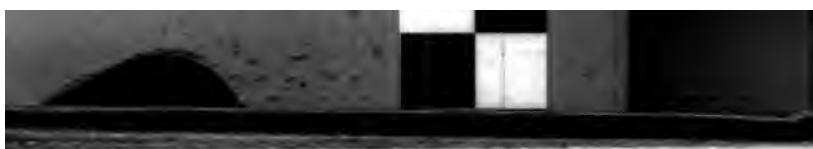
“Whilst,” said he, “I have reason to thank you for the—ah—consideration which you have extended to us” (a little pompous movement of the chin included me), “I have yet to learn that the joint imbecility of our respective children—which I trust is temporary—has caused us both an equal sense of humiliation.”

The clumsy bolt stung Mr. Carr, who retorted with a toss of his head.

“My pity for these foolish young people is, I admit, greater than my feeling of personal annoyance.”

“No doubt . . . exactly . . . very becoming,” said my father, who, having shot his bolt, was anxious to end the interview. “Yes, that is your hat on the arm-chair. Allow me to come as far as the gate with you. You can stay here, Oakton.”

The rival ministers brought into line by my unlucky loves, removed the scene of the discussion to the narrow pathway between the privet-hedge. Their veiled truce ill-concealed the antagonism of sect and class, and they separated at the gate without shaking hands.



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"A nice mess you've made of it," said my father, when he returned, partly thinking aloud, partly reproving me, "although I must say we have got out of it pretty cheaply. I'm glad he had sense to pack the girl off. The man was almost patronizing! He actually reeks of the dissenting training college. I was afraid he was going to propose we should pray for guidance. But you're not the first youngster that's been made a fool of by a girl, so I'll say no more at present."

"I should like to know where Miss Carr has been sent to," I said defiantly.

"Oh, I don't know. To Jericho, I hope! It's no concern of yours. She's given you your dismissal. That's enough for you. Why! if I had made such an idiot of myself at your age, my father would have caned me first, and then sent me packing. But there's no discipline extant in this wretched generation! Now leave me, and think over what I've said."

And so I did, but in a contrary direction to his injunction.



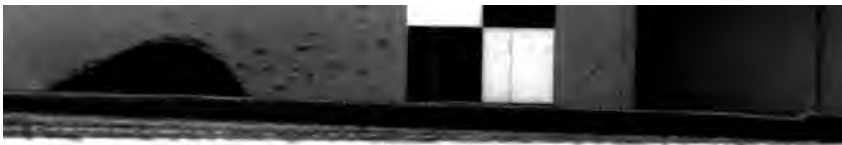
## CHAPTER VIII

LEFT to my own thoughts, vanity came to the rescue of my pride—vanity which hides ugly facts, or gives them, in youth, at least, a cloak and a feathered cap to strut in.

Although Sylvia's letter lay heavy on my heart, a hundred remembered kisses belied it, and experience had not taught me how easily expediency can strangle an affection held in reasonable check. The pride, the letter gored and trampled, cried out within me that she was the victim of base coercion, and urged me to see her again in spite of them all.

It pleased me to fancy her exiled in some Siberia of true lovers where my chivalrous quest must find her, where I might press her to my heart again and shield her with my arm against the world!

It may be because I remembered that Juliet had a nurse, or perhaps the recurrence of a childish instinct that led me to the work-room where Burgess was mending the family hose.



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"How you do wear out your socks, Master Oakie!" said she, though curiosity burned in her eyes.

But the tragic gloom on my face stayed the play of her needle.

"Oh, Master Oakie! don't take on so. You must know you're too young for love-making."

"Nurse," said I, "do me a favour."

"How, Master Oakie? What can I do?"

"They have sent her away. They mean me never to see her again."

"Ah, I was wondering what that man wanted."

"Yes; sent her away and made her write lies—dishonourable lies—to me. If I thought them true, nurse, I'd cut my throat."

"Oh, Oakie darling. Don't talk like that. You make my blood creep."

"I should," I repeated, "and with a razor too; only I know she isn't capable of it. She's noble and true!"

The nurse made an effort to escape conspiring.

"Oh, do try to mind your books, Master Oakie, and please your papa, and forget all about it."

"Forget!" exclaimed I. "Never! You can't understand what love is, or you wouldn't say that to a man when his heart is breaking."

"You're not the only one who's been through it," said nurse, who had sentimental memories. "You just feel as though all the world was tumbling



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about your ears, and that there's nothing left but to find the darkest corner to sit down to cry in."

"Ah! It's worse than that. It's—well—more like hell than anything I can imagine."

"How can you!" exclaimed she, aghast at so impious a simile under so orthodox a roof-tree.

"I mean it. Her father has sent her away from me, and I love her. Oh! a million times more than you or any one else in the world can understand."

Nurse again shook her head in denial of this arbitrary limitation of her powers.

"But how am I to help?" she asked.

"Well, you must know," I explained, "that they have a servant named Sarah."

"Who? The Carr people?"

"Yes."

"A general servant, of course."

"I believe so," I admitted. "Well. You must go over to Kolverbridge and see her, without letting Mr. Carr know, and find out where they have sent her."

"But wouldn't that be helping you to be deceitful?"

"No. Only helping me to frustrate a wicked plot. If you won't go I'll go myself; I'm desperate."

Nurse reflected a moment. Her cheeks flushed





## A PASSIONATE PILGRIM

with borrowed excitement. The fascination intrigue has for the sentimental was working its spell.

"I'll do it, Oakie darling. I must go down to the village about Miss Dolly's white frock, which hasn't been sent back from the wash."

"That's a dear old nurse!"

Then she weighed risks and chances.

"The man is pretty sure to be running about among the chapel people," she reflected, "they mostly always do."

"Even if he isn't," said I, "it won't matter. There's a path up to the back down through the little wood on the Kolverbridge road. No one will see you coming."

"But what will your father say?" said she, swerving off at the prick of her conscience.

"He'll never know."

"But when you know where your young lady is, what will you do?" she asked suspiciously.

"How can I tell, until I know?"

"You won't run away or do nothing desp'rate?"

"Trust me!"

"It isn't fair to treat you like this," she continued, using my wrongs to silence her own conscience.

"It is tyranny, nurse."

"They might have put her away somewhere. You never can tell what these dissenters are up to.



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Who knows? Perhaps I may live to nurse your babies yet."

I blushed with strange awe at the ineffable thought.

"Stranger things have happened. But when will you go? Remember, I'm sick with anxiety."

"Now, this minute, before lunch."

"You're a dear, kind old thing," and I kissed her, and she went to the kitchen to mask the expedition.

During her absence I read Tennyson's *Ænone*, finding parallel symptoms in my own emotions, for did I not too feel—

"That wheresoe'er I was, by night and day,  
All earth and air seemed only burning fire?"

There was solace also in the thought that "false-hearted Paris" was probably only slightly my senior.

When nurse returned, I learnt without surprise that Sylvia had gone on a visit to her aunt at Kolverport. That this entailed any serious hardship except separation from me, even my romantic ardour could not believe.

"Sarah told me," said nurse, "that though Miss Carr was upset-like, yet when her father scolded her she answered him back."

"Pride, nurse, pride," said I.

"The girl couldn't hear what was said, only she



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was sure the young lady tried to stop him coming over to see the master."

"Generosity, nurse! She wanted to spare me."

Still, Sarah thought that letter was written of her own accord.

"That was her generosity too, nurse. I see it all now."

Thus vanity moulds our theories to suit self-esteem.

"Sarah says she wasn't a bit frightened of her father. She won't let any one bully her, she says."

"No ; she has a magnificent spirit in spite of her heavenly gentleness."

"Well, I'm glad you're easier in your mind, Master Oakie," said nurse, resuming her mending, a little disappointed, I believe, that the visit had not been more exciting.

But was I easier in my mind? I read Sylvia's letter again for deeper meanings. What was her "most unpleasant and awkward position"? Was it a maidenly mode of describing the inner struggle between love and duty? Then in "moments of thoughtlessness" she had allowed me "to think things which must be forgotten." This merely reflected modesty shrinking from the storm. There were other readings to it, of course, but the noblest motives must have prompted her, otherwise



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she would not be Sylvia. As for "an engagement between us being impossible," of course she meant a public engagement. When heart is pledged to heart it needs no formal sanction! Then there was a phrase which glowed with solemn nuptial fires. "The excuses that I might make for my conduct are all of them flattering to you." This, being interpreted, surely meant, "I love you in spite of all worldly and social obstacles." It is true that her supposition that her "knowledge of the world, however limited," was superior to mine, suggested a certain patronage of attitude, out of place in so tender a romance; but who can weigh one's words at such a moment? And so I scanned her words like a commentator studying an obscure text in order to harmonize the meaning with his own wishes. For a long afternoon I warmed the chilling message at the fires of my affections. But what a different letter mine would have been! "Farewell" was her last word. But should true love accept so formal a signal to fold his wings and fly elsewhere? Might not the letter be intended to try my affections? A lover capable of yielding before it was an intruder in the warm Eden I had scaled.

Thus musing, I wandered down to the Kolver, whose waters, flowing across the fields of a whole broad county, reach the sea at Kolverport, where the autumn flower I cast into the stream might,



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after many meanderings, meet Sylvia's sorrowful gaze. The destiny of the stream fixed my purpose. Kolverport was scarcely fifty miles from Kelverton. What was this to a man ready to cross "shadowy mountains and sounding seas" to reach his exiled love?

Unfortunately I had only half-a-crown. The fare was eight-and-sixpence. Money was scarce in the family. To apply to my father was impossible. Dorothea, who was thrifty, had, I knew, more than two pounds in her money-box. That source was closed to me. How could I humble myself to borrow half-a-sovereign of her? The youth at Burchester, it was whispered, occasionally raised money on articles of jewellery or even of clothing. Phillpot major, who "made a book," was believed to have sold for fifteen shillings in the summer term, to a dealer in old clothes, a new great-coat intended for winter wear. The absence of this garment in his wardrobe, detected by his mother in the holidays, led to an inquiry, which resulted in the condign punishment and degradation of the unlucky young sportsman. The "Sixth" regarded this transaction with disapproval, as unbecoming to the character of a gentleman as well as lacking in the worldly resource naturally expected from a Burcastrian. But now I felt sympathy for Phillpot. I had a silver hunting-watch, which I considered worth at least ten



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pounds, although it kept time so inaccurately that a sum in mental arithmetic was necessary to discover the hour unless the hands were set every day.

This watch must be sacrificed. Unfortunately Kelverton, lacking in enterprise, possessed no financial conveniences. But what Kelverton could not provide might be obtained at Swilford, the nearest market-town, distant a long five miles across the fields. Then, as Romeo in his tragic need remembered the apothecary's shop, so I recalled the glitter of three gilded balls which shone in the sun in the narrow street behind the 'White Hart,' over an old shop where, years ago, I had purchased a second-hand pistol, destined to be confiscated by my house-master.

I was now in a state of mind to which a good-natured man of the world might have ministered with greater advantage than a country parson. A youth of spirit in his first passionate pilgrimage has, if not an instinctive desire of martyrdom, a strong temptation to play to the gallery which sits in his own fancy. A bludgeon, moreover, is no remedy for the delirious state of delicious unreason into which I was plunged.

Perhaps if my father had reasoned soberly, instead of blustering awkwardly, I should not have walked across to Swilford and returned with a pawn-ticket and sixteen shillings in place of my watch. But after lunch he fired a broadside into



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the frail ship freighted with my poor cargo of reason, and effectually sunk it.

He had, he said, no intention of telling Dr. Smythe "what a fool I had made of myself," because the head-master would probably consider that my taste for low company unfitted me to meet his daughters.

"If, sir," said I, "I'm not good enough for the Miss Smythes, the Doctor ought to be warned of it."

"Don't talk like a fool," returned my father angrily. "If I have no wish to debar you from the society of ladies of your own class, it is because I think their refining influence may help to bring you to your senses."

Then he closed his study-door noisily to end the discussion, and I went off, full of smouldering resentment, to trudge across the wet fields to Swilford.



## CHAPTER IX

THE first train for Kolverport started at 6.30, and arrived there at 9.30, owing to a tedious delay at Burchester Junction midway on the journey. Keeping my intention to myself, I went to bed early, spent a restless night, and woke at sunrise to find the clear light of a beautiful autumn morning pouring in at the window. A soft west wind was shaking the yellowing trees, and the gloom of yesterday was only a memory.

I dressed with scrupulous care in the blue serge suit the Burchester tailor had lately made for me, and selected, from my limited store of neckties, one whose tints mixed best with the ribbon of my straw hat. My spirit seemed to have caught something of the cheerfulness of the pleasant morning, and chiefly I regretted the black eye which marred, I feared, the general correctness of my appearance.

To prevent my slumbering family from imagining that I had drowned myself in the Kolver, I wrote the following note to Dorothea, and slipped it under





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her door: "I have gone out for the day, and shall not return until late. Time uncertain."

I would teach them to treat me like a child! All my theories of personal liberty were in revolt. The French Revolution trampling over the feudal system was animated by no dissimilar spirit. The swallows skimming over the elm-tops told me that every man has an inalienable right to do what he likes. Had not this highest privilege of manhood been tyrannically opposed by my father?

On the platform a small group of country people were waiting.

The station-master, who sold me my ticket, looked critically at my black eye.

At last the slipshod parliamentary train rolled into the station round the sweeping curve bordered by hedges bright with autumn berries. My journey was through a charming pastoral land to Burchester, where I breakfasted at the dismal refreshment-bar and caught the through train to Kolverport.

So far I had taken it for granted that Sylvia would approve of my dashing step, but when we were within ten minutes' run of Kolverport, I perceived that my sudden appearance on the scene might be a cause of embarrassment. This thought chilled the buoyant self-approbation which made the first part of my journey seem a romantic pilgrimage.



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Seven years before, I had stayed at Kelperport and caught the measles, to my father's extreme annoyance, and had passed on the disease to Dorothea. The incident was a famous one in the family record. My father still, on occasions, waxed warm on the expense and the sanitary deficiencies to which the affliction was traced.

The sea, blue and sparkling, swung suddenly into sight. I stepped on the platform, my blood stirred to smell the salt on the breeze. How delightful to climb the headland with Sylvia, and gaze out to the dim horizon! On one side the vast solitude of the sea, on the other, two true hearts in perfect unison!

The convalescence following the measles had fixed Kelperport not unpicturesquely on my memory. I remembered the harbour, whose mouth the sand was silting up, and the wharf where a collier brig or a timber-ship from a Baltic port was usually unloading. But in compensation for a decreasing commerce, a little town, bright and sunny, had sprung up to the west, and there I expected to find Acacia Cottage where Sylvia's aunt dwelt.

Since my visit represented an overt act of rebellion, subterfuges became as objectless as they were unworthy. I was young Lochinvar come to claim a bride, not a diffident school-boy lover fearful of an old maid's frowns. Why should I



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blench? I was a man fighting for his heart's rights—no slave, destitute of wedding garments, cringing before a closed door.

Acacia Cottage stood fronting the sparkling channel, a neat, white-walled abode, a little aggressively vaunting green shutters freshly painted, and encompassed by a square garden where tamarisk and euonymus defied, and a few meagre poplars shrank from, the teeth of the south-west gales.

Approaching with nervous eagerness, I looked over the gate and saw Sylvia on the lawn, pink, fresh, and charming in the kind sea-breeze.

"Sylvia!" I cried, "Sylvia!"

My voice startled her and paled her cheek.

"Good heavens! What have you come for?"

This was not the greeting I had expected. Then after hesitating a moment she added—

"Go down to the beach by the groyne. I'll come to you. I don't want my aunt to see you."

Something practical in her voice chilled me. I went and stood under the lee of the ugly concrete wall that protected the foreshore against the invading waves, and watched the small tug fussily busy at the harbour-mouth. Here Sylvia joined me with a perplexed and frowning face.

Her attack began without ceremony.

"Is it," she asked, "because you consider you haven't made me sufficiently ridiculous, that you insist on following me here?"



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"I came because you wrote me a letter which you have given me a hundred reasons for thinking you could not mean."

"I suppose you are too young to know when one is in earnest. What did you imagine I wrote it for?"

"I thought it might be to test me."

"To test you! My poor boy, are you the hero of a penny novelette?"

"You meant it, then?"

"Of course I did. Every word."

I looked at her a moment in a sort of ferocious misery, and then, as the cloud of bewilderment slightly lifted, from the fragments of my scattered disillusionings a new and ugly theory was formed.

"Idiot," said the inner voice. "She made a fool of you for her own amusement. Now her game is over."

As we grow older we laugh at the poignant sorrows of youth, but still I think that I have never yet plunged deeper into the gulf of mental pain than in that moment of sickening disappointment. The delightful couch, fashioned by the radiant fancies of first love, had suddenly changed into a merciless rack. Three times the waves splashed on the shingle before my answer came in a torrent. At last in unbridled speech I painted her conduct with colours mixed from my own sufferings.



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"Shame is the deadliest part of what I feel," I cried, "shame that I was eager to sacrifice my whole existence for a little pink and white traitress! Five minutes ago I worshipped you. . . . And now? Well, now I despise you only one degree less than I loathe myself for being such a mad fool. My father was right!"

A look shone in her eyes, half triumph, I believe, and half remorse.

"Had I guessed you were so excitable a boy," she said, "I would never have let you flirt with me."

"Traitor! wicked traitress!" I repeated.

And thus all the rainbow towers crumbled away into suffocating dust. I saw her beautiful, young, but now troubled face for a moment over the ruins, and turned abruptly away.

"Won't you say good-bye, Mr. Blake?" she cried after me. But the vapid courtesies found no place in the clashing confusion of my disappointments.

A big lump climbed up in my throat, shutting off speech, and I left her without a word, and without looking back.



## CHAPTER X

KICKING my heels on the familiar pavement of Burchester High Street, waiting for the five-o'clock train to roll me and my sorry cargo back to Kelverton, I met Eversley, an old Burcastrian, whose name had lately appeared in the list of successful candidates for the line.

Pleased to meet an old school-fellow, he explained a little pompously that he was off to India next week, and wished to have "a look at the old place before sailing."

Then in answer to his many questions, I gave him all the school-news, at that moment of no more interest to me than the politics of the frogs and mice.

He was staying at 'The Crozier,' and begged me to dine with him. I could catch the 9.30 train home. So he tucked his arm under mine, handed his cigar-case, and led me to the ancient and hospitable bar for "a sherry and bitters."

I forgave the element of natural patronage. His life had moved forward to a breezier hill-top than



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mine, with India, his regiment, and the big winds of the world stirring about his ears, whilst I, although an inch taller, and with nearly as visible a moustache, was still a Burcastrian in the narrow vale of tutelage.

"So you're leaving the old place next term, Blake? You used to be a clever chap, who never relapsed into a 'swot.' I'd lay odds you'll do well at the 'Varsity. Sorry you're not going into the Service, though. Public School men are badly wanted. But I say, how did you get that black eye?"

"Honestly enough—licking a cad," I answered in gloomy satisfaction.

"Ah, I remember you were a youngster who could always hit pretty straight. But you look down on your luck, as though you'd come from a funeral."

"So I have!"

"What! In those clothes?"

"Not an every-day funeral. We didn't bury a corpse, but only a damned bit of folly of mine."

"You'll have a whole cemetery full before you're my age, my boy. A girl, of course?"

"Yes."

"Thought so! We all go through it. It's hell while it lasts. No one knows better than I."

And he sipped his sherry and looked sentimental.



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"Young?" he asked, blowing a roguish cloud of smoke.

"Eighteen."

"Pretty?"

"Lovely!"

"Fair or dark?"

"Between the two. Hair a sort of lustrous brown when the sun shines on it, and eyes like stars."

"And she's chucked you for another sportsman, eh?"

"Jilted me," I groaned. "But I can't talk of it."

"As bad as that? Poor old chap! I'm dashed sorry! But it will be all right this time next year—if not this time next week."

But Eversley was naturally more interested in his own love affairs than mine, and whilst I listened vaguely, wondering how he could attach importance to such kitchen stuff, ran through the leading phases of half-a-dozen. They all had the same ending.

"Of course, Blake, when I saw the girl meant the whole thing—ring, orange-blossoms and altar—I sheered off. A sub can't think of marrying, especially before he's had a good 'look in.' But 'play the game fair'—

'That's what I always say;  
But kiss 'em when you may'—



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Te tootle tootle tay! You should just hear Patty Petherick sing it at the *Imperial*. It's ripping!"

But I, who had only seen pictures of Miss Petherick, who had never been to a music-hall, and scarcely knew London, wondered what solace there could be for a bruised love in the tawdry vulgar world of which Eversley's chatter gave me a dim glimpse. It seemed a land where "broken hearts" were unconsidered trifles, and lovers' sighs became satyric winks. How different to the melancholy groves, whither my forlorn affections had found refuge under Sorrow's wing!

It seemed a strange irony that a love great as mine should be classed with the two-penny flirtations of an Eversley! But why try to show the gulf between us? How could such as he understand?

But the jigging street tune, "Play the game fair," which he had started in my head, trotted relentlessly at the heels of my grief.

Dinner, a plentiful dinner with joint and game, and foaming champagne, to comfort my heaviness, was served in the old coffee-room where a portrait of "The Rev. Dr. Smythe, head-master of Burchester School," looked down, sternly, in cap and gown on our feasting. Soon the care-defying spell lurking in the sparkling grape-juice, like fire in flint, mounted to my brain, and I wondered at my own laughter.

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After all, perhaps Eversley was right about women.

He talked of the future; of the "great war bound to come"; criticized the Commander-in-Chief—unfavourably; deplored "the wretched recruits who made his company look like a preparatory school in uniform"; and bragged of India as "the only school for a real soldier." Soon however, wine stimulating the tenderer fancies, he retold the stories of his loves, and drew from his experiences rigid laws for the guidance of youth.

"You can't trust 'em, Blake. Take my word for it. I've seen the world. They don't run straight as we do. Why, when I was at the Crammer's in Kensington, there was a little girl at the pastry-cooks where we used to go for cherry-brandy. Well! I used to take her on the river every Saturday in the summer. She swore she was devoted to me, and all that 'rot.' So I said to myself: 'This is one of the right kind,'—that you read of in books, you know. The 'racket' went on for a month or six weeks, till one day, a fellow told me that Macpherson, who's just joined the Black Watch, was nuts on my girl, and had been seen with her above Sudbury in a Canadian canoe. Well, to make a long story short, we compared notes, and found that the letters she'd written to him were almost word for word the same as those I treasured. We were both her 'dearest boys!'



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We roared about it. But as she was a jolly little girl, full of fun, I said to her, 'Look here, we can be pals all the same,' but she cut up rough, and refused 'to have anything to do with a man base enough to read the letters she had written to another friend.' We won't trust 'em, my boy, but will drink their health. Here! waiter, buck up and fill our glasses! I'm deuced glad I met you, Blake. We've had a jolly evening, talking over old times. Wonder when we shall meet again! What, nine o'clock? I'll come with you to the station and see the last of you."

Then, unconscious that I was imperfectly sober, although my tongue and legs conveyed messages which a more experienced brain would not have misunderstood, I accepted, as a parting cup, a long glass of whisky and soda-water. Then we went out into the dark street. The weather had changed. The rain which was falling refreshed my heated head, but the lamplights jiggled, "That's what I always say!"

Reckless of consequences, I took possession of a first-class carriage, and, with my feet on the cushions, and a long cigar in my mouth, started for Kelverton with a mind divided between a hiccough and a sigh.

\* \* \* \* \*

But the next morning, and the muddy awakening to abominable recollections!



## A PASSIONATE PILGRIM

"Go to your room, sir. I will speak to you in the morning when you are sober."

In my glazed eye and thickened speech, my father had found an answer to his indignant inquiry.

But the wine-juice hummed in my head and benumbed my intelligence, and the hairy beast, the attendant on Bacchus, gripped me and grinned over my shoulder at my outraged parent, and spoke for me in jocular misery.

And what had this debased exponent of my sorrows and my solace said ?

I had been to Kolverport to see Sylvia, who had jilted me. I should never b'lieve in another woman 's-long-'s-I-lived. I had met Eversley, just gazhetted to the Westshire Regiment. Had my father dined at the Crozhier ? Ex'lent "quizzhine" an' a fine tap o' fizz. He might take my word for it, and try dry Pom'ry !

What hostages of my sottish folly had not I left with him ! Hideous scraps of this Stygian conversation haunted me. The pack of imps who dance after Silenus flung all reason, fear, reverence, dignity out of the window.

"Go to bed, you wretched, tipsy boy !" cried my father aghast.

"What a disgusting spectacle !" exclaimed Dorothea.

But I was "never sob'rer in m'life." Though if

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"ever a man had an 'xcuse, I had. Though m'heart was broken, no one could say I wash screwed !"

"A'ri', Dolly, dishgushted, are you ? Never you min' ! you've a heart that won't break. Not it, ah ! ah ! ah !"

Then I remember mounting the illusive stairs singing—

"That's what I always say,  
Kiss 'em when you may,"

leaving a wake of ribaldry behind me. Later, a portly and stern figure removed my candle, and to prove my sobriety I cried after it, "Min' the greash !"

Then darkness fell on a soddened mind without power of focus, but which lay outside the enveloping body stretched on a bed that seemed the spoke of a revolving wheel, of which the foot was constantly uppermost.

My blood-shot eyes blinked in the bright morning light ; thoughts of the cool, clear bathing-pool made me shudder. Vainly the good resolutions trooped up to comfort me from the crannies of oblivion where they had hidden themselves. The wretched comforters were too late.

Could I offer my youth and inexperience as a palliation of my drunken excesses ? The consequences must be faced without the support of a single decent excuse.



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"Oh Sylvia! Sylvia! traitress and wicked flirt, to what have you brought me?"

I stole down-stairs with a wracking headache, to find refuge in the work-room where nurse sat.

"Oh, Master Oakie, Master Oakie, what dreadful goings-on!"

But she gave me a cup of strong tea to revive me.

"Was I very bad, nurse?"

"Dreadful! You couldn't walk straight, and went up-stairs singing and laughing. I never thought I should live to see my boy like that. It's a judgment of Providence for my share in spoiling him!"

Then came the bell for prayers, which I could not face, followed by the odour of fried bacon at which my soul revolted. I sat holding my aching head till I heard my father enter his study, where I followed him.

"Oh, father, I'm ashamed. Can you forgive me?"

There was sincerity as well as debasement in the sinner's cry.

But the domestic helot, repentant and proud, must pay the penalty in full.

The enormity of my offence, the magnitude of the disgrace I had brought on a clergyman's household, grew in criminal proportions under my father's eloquence.



## A PASSIONATE PILGRIM

"I'm sorry, sir. Indeed I'm sorry, but my own shame's punishment enough. I let a girl make a fool of me, and got drunk by accident. There's nothing to be said about my conduct which can make it better or worse. If I'm the ruffian you think I am, hadn't I better go over to the dépôt at Burchester and enlist for a soldier?"

And this veiled threat somewhat moderated the paternal wrath, and the dismal scene ended with reproaches and promises of amendment.

The following day "the sinner that repenteth" was the text of my father's sermon.

On Monday Lord Oakton arrived, and took up his quarters for the night in the best bedroom, where no one else ever slept except the Bishop, when a Confirmation or other business of his diocese brought him into our parish.

It may have been because I felt that he held a sort of moral mortgage on my conduct that I experienced some shame at meeting him in spite of his winning quality of genial worldliness when his prejudices happened to be in abeyance.

From the few scraps of conversation which the acute-eared Decrothea overheard, I inferred that he had come to consult my father about the management of his own son, which presented difficulties. In the exchange of parental views my own delinquencies were discussed, for Lord Oakton finding me seated, in a leaden fit of depression, under the



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ancient mulberry-tree on the lawn, came and sat down beside me, and said—

“Well, sir, you’ve made a fool of yourself?”

“My father appears to make no secret of it, my lord.”

“Why should he? Isn’t he a parson and obliged to take a professional—I mean a serious—view of these things? Come, sir, confess you did make a fool of yourself?”

“A horrible, degraded fool!”

Lord Oakton was a tall, stout man, white-haired and cleanly shaved, and of that ruddy complexion which in moments of excitement deepens into purple.

“Remember,” said my father, “never to argue with your godfather. It is very bad for him.”

Lord Oakton looked at me critically and rubbed his obstinate-looking chin.

Feeling called upon to defend myself, I muttered something vague to the effect that it was easy to make a mistake at my age.

“It’s easy at any age, especially when there’s a girl in the case,” said he.

Our aristocracy are less the victims of ethical platitudes than the middle classes, and I was relieved to find that the moral view of the affair was not uppermost with him.

“The women play the deuce with you excitable young fellows,” he added. “You look as if you



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had been in the wars," he added, with a glance at my discoloured eye. "What a greedy fellow you are, paying court to Venus, Mars, and Bacchus all at once; eh?"

"I see my father has told you all!"

"Not he. He's grieved and shocked, and all the rest of it, but I should like to hear your version. Who is the girl?"

"Miss Carr."

"Daughter of the dissenting minister, eh?"

"Yes."

"Pleasant for your father, that."

"Of course, it annoyed him."

"I'm glad you can make allowances for him. You wanted to marry her, eh?"

Then I explained that it was my last term at Burchester, that I had hoped to win the Dodson scholarship, and then, if I did well at Oxford, I might have married her before very long. After all it was only a matter of four or five years! "Of course all this sounds ridiculous to you," I added, "but I could have done it if Miss Carr hadn't jilted me."

"Jilted you, did she?"

"That's the only word for it, my lord."

"Lucky for you she did, or you would have married her. You're that sort of fellow. How old are you?"

"Nineteen."



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"Well, lots of good fellows before you have made asses of themselves. Let that comfort you. You'll find plenty of time for love-making without taking it on whilst you're a school-boy."

"I've done with it, my lord."

"Have you, now?" said he, laughing good-naturedly, and he went on chuckling until my father, who had been seeking his guest, joined us.

"I say, Blake," said his lordship, "this boy of yours seems a lad of spirit. Perhaps that's because he's my godson. A clear case of spiritual heredity. Ha ! ha ! ha ! He tells me he has done with love-making. You may believe him if you like : I don't."

My father was ill-pleased at this jocular view of my offending, but could not afford to show it.

"I hope," said he, "he's grateful to you for your good advice."

"As grateful as they usually are. I told you not to make an ass of yourself, didn't I?" he added, turning to me.

"You did, my lord ; but you admitted that all men make fools of themselves sooner or later in the same way."

"Not all," said Lord Oakton, visibly amused. "Surely I excluded an important minority, including your father and myself. Don't be hard on the young fellow, Blake. He's all right. Even if he did make an unfortunate marriage, there are on



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entailed estates and big family interests to be jeopardized."

Then they walked into the house together, leaving me to my reflections.

After the lapse of a few dreary days, I returned to Burchester as a pupil for the last time.

"Your character has been lost," said my father. "It remains with you to regain it."

But the matter seemed scarcely worth arguing about, so I made no answer.

When, a few hours later, the head-master gave me a patronizing hand to shake, I felt older than he was in spite of his grey head.

But you, Sylvia, I shut in a dungeon in my heart, where I visited you in secret, with tears and reproaches and the bitterness of remembered kisses.



## CHAPTER XI

WHEN the door of delight closed upon me, and I no longer could disport in the Elysian fields of fancy with heroic lovers, I stept back on the world's dusty track ; and common-sense, long baffled as a counsellor, walked at my elbow, and whenever I would listen, said, "O fool ! work ; don't drivel."

And in time the big burst bubble of iridescent vanities began to swell again, although in more sombre hues. Pride stirred ambition, and my studies began to bring me moderate peace.

Sylvia must learn the worth of the man whose heart she has broken ! Perhaps the baths of soft fire she had prepared for me clarified my intellect, for it began to understand in flashes, and my horizons grew. The school rivals, whose powers I had dreaded, appeared dull human cattle capable only of browsing stolidly in the ancient classic pasture-lands, across which my love-freshened faculties led me with discerning eye.

"Blake's sure of the Dodson scholarship," said the Sixth.



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I won it. Dr. Smythe wrote to my father, "to express gratification at a result alike creditable to my industry and intelligence," and to announce that he was entering me for a Brazenknob scholarship.

The youth, whom the goddess of Love had mocked and abandoned, found a cold but juster protectress in her sister of Wisdom. For I conquered at Brazenknob too. This time the Doctor writing home again exclaimed: "Your son stands among the most accomplished youths that have lately left our precincts."

Returning to Kelverton on a misty December day, for the first time in his life my father said: "My dear boy, I'm delighted to see you!"

For my name had appeared in the newspapers in the University Intelligence in honourable scholastic association, and success is the household god of domestic idolatry. Even Dorothea, impressed, forbore to contradict me; whilst nurse did not forget that she had predicted victory for "her boy" when his fortunes were abased.

"Ah, Sylvia, Sylvia!" I thought, "had you only been true!"

I was no longer a school-boy, but a "Varsity man," and a Dodson and Brazenknob scholar.

Did she repent of her folly in rejecting me, I wondered. Then came the usual sacrifices to wounded vanity. Sometimes I tried hard to



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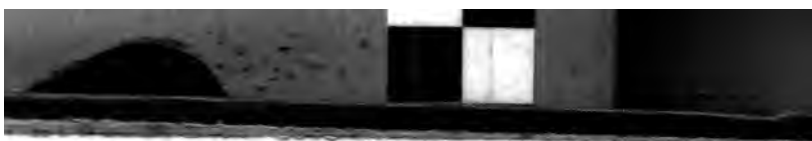
picture her at my feet, "pleading to be taken back." This effort of the imagination was unsuccessful because the faintly satirical lines at the corners of her mouth ill lent themselves to the humiliating posture. But my own attitude I figured vividly: "Rise, I entreat you, Miss Carr; you are appealing to something within me already dead."

But she avenged herself for this insufferable insult by driving me to address "My dead heart" in four sonnets. My verses met with the approval of the small circle of sentimental undergraduates round which they circulated, and finally were printed as "an unpaid contribution" in a weekly paper devoted to millinery, and republished at a later period in the *Freshman's Garland of Verse*.

But ere long, although still sore from my experiment in love, the resiliency of youth and the charm and spaciousness of new horizons, taught me to regard my defeat with melancholy philosophy not untinctured with humour.

But that mysterious organ, the heart, after undergoing an assault and capitulating to the storming emotions, needs for complete recovery a period of rest. Permanent indulgence in the luxuries of poetic sorrow is possible only for the select few who can afford it.

I was something more than an enfranchised school-boy when the noble college received me



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with a solemn welcome. Statesmen and poets had paced the quiet cloisters and green garden ways before me; their benign shadows haunted the place. Brazenknob scholars looked down from their picture-frames on me as I filled a place at the table where they too had sat, and drank the famous college ale in sober cups which they had quaffed. The dignified and monastic atmosphere of the place repelled the skittish loves. Vestal shapes appealing to the intellect and not the senses might with propriety be pictured, moving among those solemn cloisters, but not a Sylvia with a ready tongue and cheerful satirical indentations at the corner of her charming mouth. Brazenknob had the reputation of producing a placid form of philosophic misogyny, and its Fellows eschewed marriage with a persistency worthy of our Founder.

The change first made itself felt when the spring-time came again, and the ancient thorn-tree, loveliest of its kind, that grew behind our chapel wall, was in full flower. The early summer, knocking at my emotions, might still awaken a sigh, but the rougher coating of that hungry egoism, which compels youth to regard the outer world as a playground for its impotent tyranny, had been rubbed off.

The May-tree was the test. A thrush sang in its snowy heart, the soft breeze brushed the



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blossoms on to the incomparable turf, but though the boughs were beautiful and the bird sang sweetly, I could think of Sylvia with critical resentfulness, and without a serious pang. A year before, tossing through the sleepless nights, such a thing had seemed impossible.

And whilst I stood meditating, my father's voice roused me.

No; there was "nothing wrong at home," but a matter of important business had brought him. Then we paced the garden-walks while he explained the cause of his sudden visit. I was probably aware, he said, that his income had fallen off more than a third. Under these circumstances he was sure that I would prefer to discontinue my allowance if my Terms could be kept without it. He had consulted Dr. Smythe, who entertained "a flattering opinion of my abilities." The Doctor had said "a Dodson scholar is always good to pull his own weight."

"In short," said my father, coming to the point, "he has recommended you for an excellent vacation tutorship."

I had no pedagogic instincts, but I was longing for complete freedom. Sylvia had spurned me because I was a parasite compelled to pawn a watch in order to see her. But here was a prospect of flying on independent wings, master of my own flight!



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"As there was no time to be lost," said my father, "I accepted the engagement for you."

Then he proceeded to tell me that Mr. Webb, a retired and wealthy Yorkshire manufacturer, wishing to send his sons to Burchester, had written to Dr. Smythe to ask him to recommend a Burchestrian fitted to prepare them. So the Doctor, an old friend of my father, had thought of me, and the thing was done. The duties would be light, "the remuneration not unhandsome," and there would be "adequate opportunities for private study."

But a still greater change was threatened.

"Perhaps," said my father, "you may have heard that my friend Lord Oakton proposes to marry again."

My godfather was more than sixty, and the news astonished me.

"The step," he resumed, marking my surprise, "may be open to criticism, but he understands his own affairs better than we can pretend to."

But I smiled to remember how my godfather had informed me for my own comfort, "that many better fellows than myself had made asses of themselves before me."

"What," I asked, "does Cecil Oakton think of it?"

"Lord Oakton," replied my father, "does not consider that his son deserves the sacrifice of his own domestic comfort."



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"He's at Cambridge, isn't he?" I asked.

"Yes, but his college tutor—doubtless for good reasons—has recommended his removal. There will be great changes in Lord Oakton's family, and the young man's presence at home might prove a source of inconvenience to the new Lady Oakton, so my old friend has thought well to consult me. In fact, he has requested me to try what I can do for his son."

"And what decision have you come to, sir?"

"After due reflection I find it is my duty to acquiesce in Lord Oakton's wishes. It would, however, increase a difficult task if you were at home."

"Of course he will want my room," said I.

"That is true, but it is the question of discipline rather than of house-room that I was considering."

"I see," said I. "He will want a firm hand."

"Exactly!" said my father. "And until your recent little indiscretion—now amply atoned for—is forgotten, quite forgotten, in the parish, it would—ah—don't you think—be better——?"

He wished to spare the feelings of the Dodson and Brazenknob scholar.

"Much better," said I. "Of course you can manage him better if I'm away."

"Exactly. Moreover, your own pupils will take up all your time in the vacation. Of course, we shall hope to see you whenever you can be spared."



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I think you will see, from every point of view, how satisfactory the arrangement promises to be."

"What does Dorothea think of it?" I asked.

"She entirely approves," said my father.

Then, after some further conversation on the subject of his pupils and mine, I accompanied my father to the station, and saw him into the train.



## CHAPTER XII

THE next two years have left fainter traces in my diary and on my memory. My time was spent for the most part between Ferndale Park, where the Webbs had planted the first seeds of what may become, if my elder pupil awake to a fuller sense of his duties, a county family of importance. In this slumberous but opulent centre my existence was uneventful as the walk of a housefly across a new ceiling. Mrs. Webb hoped I should "regard myself as quite one of the family," and permitted me to send my clothes to the private laundry—a concession my predecessor had neither enjoyed nor perhaps deserved,—and Mr. Webb occasionally gave me a day in his well-stocked coverts where I learnt to slay with efficiency a driven cock-pheasant sailing down the wind. These, and other amenities, compensated for the curtailment of personal freedom and the dreary pilgrimage through the Latin Primer at the slow heels of two reluctant lads.



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Meanwhile at home at the Rectory the Honourable Cecil occupied my room, where as a pupil his conduct left much to be desired, unless Dorothea misrepresented him in the weekly letters she dutifully wrote.

"Mr. Cecil," I learnt, "was giving papa a good deal of trouble, and Lord Oakton had been down." From a later extract from this correspondence, I obtained a clearer view into the situation. "Mr. Cecil told me yesterday," wrote Dorothea, "that it was a beastly shame (he is a little coarse) that his father married again. He asked me how I should like papa to do so. I said 'Papa would never think of such a thing!' Just fancy it! 'Why not?' Mr. Cecil asked. 'He's five years younger than mine, and not the least gouty.'"

Soon after this there came an unfortunate outbreak, painfully resembling my own unforgettable disaster. "A shocking thing has happened," wrote Dorothea, "and I am sure *you* will agree with me when I tell you. Mr. Cecil rode his bay mare over to Sleafold, and appears to have spent the day at the inn. He came home in a most extraordinary state. His own man and the gardener had to help him up-stairs. Poor papa was furious, and says that nothing will induce him to put up with it."

Next I find Dorothea regretting that "Mr. Oakton was so self-indulgent, for he really was



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quite good-natured, and, some thought, good-looking."

When I took a "First in Mods" my father suddenly desired to see more of me, so Cecil and I frequently met.

Although his manner was outwardly friendly, it seemed based on some secret distrust. I remember once fishing with him for a whole day when the trout were rising to gladden the angler's heart, but not even the pleasure of a fine basket of fish, the joint spoil of our rods, could induce confidence on his part.

Walking home across the familiar fields, I ventured to hope that "he didn't find the place too dull."

Dull? Certainly not. Why should he be dull?

"But you were badly bored here at first," said I.

"You see, Blake, I shook down. There's some shooting, and I do a little hunting in the season. It wouldn't be half bad if your governor didn't trot me through a course of Political Economy, 'to fit me,' as he says, 'for my future position.' But it isn't so tiresome as coaching 'pups' in the Vac."

"But I'm paid for that. Besides, I've no choice."

"Neither have I, since my father found me a step-mamma. I must live somewhere till I'm twenty-one."

Then he grinned—mischievously I thought—at



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the prospect. The smile seemed to say, "Wait till I come into the fortune my mother left me, and you shall see!"

"Of course you'll do what you like then."

"I think so."

"You'll scarcely continue your education."

"Not quite on the present lines."

Outside the Rectory-gate a farm-lad handed him a note, and I saw his face colour.

"Something about a filly I want," he said, in reply to my glance of curiosity.



## CHAPTER XIII

LANGUAGE is speckled with trite phrases coined in recognition of the part the unexpected plays in human affairs. Knocked off his well-wadded stool of self-complacency, the victim "of the irony of circumstance" rises to his feet half believing in the existence of some perverse force capable of thwarting the more dignified designs of Providence which he always fancies are on his side.

One June morning, in my last year at Oxford, I received a dirty ill-written envelope bearing the Kelverton post-mark. Usually communications in unknown hands were bills, for my credit at Oxford was out of proportion to my resources, and the temptation to make the present comfortable at the expense of the future is strong in lusty youth. But the most peremptory demand for payment, backed up by threats of appeal to my college authorities, never gave me so great a shock as that hideous letter. At the foot of the scrawl I read "Thomas Holford."

"Your young lady, Miss Carr," wrote my old





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antagonist, "is staying with her aunt at Burley's Farm, and is carrying on with the Honourable Cecil Oakton. They meet down by the Kelter at the old place which you and me both remember, every afternoon almost, at four o'clock. He means no good."

This was all.

And then, lo! of a sudden, a whole mob of impish jealousies began to sting me. Imagine a dull, slack soul such as he in the hands of Sylvia Carr, who had actually made a fool of me! In vain vanity shrieked, "Young Oakton isn't the sort of man she would care about," when worldly wisdom retorted contemptuously, "Nonsense! he's the son of a peer."

Soon after I went to Oxford I had read in a marked copy of a local paper, which Dorothea sent me, the report of a "farewell tea given by a few of his friends to the Rev. James Carr." At this festival the minister told his entertainers "of his removal to what he hoped might be a wider sphere of usefulness at Birmingham."

Kelverton, therefore, ought to have been outside Sylvia's "sphere of interest." But apparently she had induced her aunt, probably for a purpose, to return to the scene of her former triumphs, and had caught a richer quarry.

But instead of conjecturing as to the chances that had permitted young Oakton to usurp the fair



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throne, once, alas ! mine, I went to the Dean and requested to be allowed to go to Kelverton for the day on urgent private affairs, and in due course was landed on the Kelverton platform. The whole country-side was heavy with the scent of new-mown hay, but I inhaled the deep odours, laden with untranslatable memories, with the nostrils of a jealous spy.

There was no reason in my mood ; it was vindictive and bad. I remembered the contempt she never concealed for the narrow dissenting circles in which she was forced to move, and thought it unlikely a girl who had rejected a future Brazen-knob and Dodson scholar would meet any fitting lover among the sleek tradespeople with whom her father's ministry brought her into constant but resented association. For two years this fancy had avenged my defeated pride. But now that Holford's letter had removed that flattering solace of my vanity, the ashes that I thought were cold began to smoulder into a tormenting blaze.

Moreover, as my father's son, had not I a duty to perform ? The intrigue must be stopped.

But how ? I might have posted Holford's letter to him, but that seemed a despicable mode of dealing with the affair. Oakton was an ass, but an obstinate ass. Besides, he was too old and too rich to be bullied. There was, too, internal evidence to prove their acquaintance was not an affair of

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yesterday. The more I reflected the more I "despised" Sylvia and hated Oakton.

Then the memory of Holford's face grinning over the bracken, shone in my mind, a goat-footed fancy to be scouted with disgust. Could a Brazen-knob scholar play the satyr and stalk through the tree-boles, the girl into whose lap he had poured forth all the poetry of his soul?

And as I mused, I followed the footpath leading to the Kelter which her feet and mine had so often trodden, and an imp of darkness walked at my elbow.

It was without any openly confessed object of playing the spy that I made my way across the sweet June fields. There gleamed the pool by which we had often sat!—there was the birch-tree against which she had leant, listening in mockery, no doubt, whilst a love-sick lad bragged of what he would do in the world if she would only trust him! Then the memory of furtive kisses stung me. O ass! O fool! O dolt! Shame and recorded moments of bliss, jostling in a blended emotion, soured by jealousy.

And now I had strayed to the rugged upland above the Kelter where Tom Holford's red face suddenly appearing, had ended the lyrical side of my little drama.

Here I sat, heavy with two years' changes, in a ferny hollow, measuring, with my memory, the difference between then and now.



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There was something grim in the situation in strange contrast with the beauty of the day.

The Kelter babbled below me, above a soaring lark was hammering a fairy anvil in the sky, but I felt like one come to bury something. The murmur in the birch-trees' boughs made a funeral march. Above the line of trees fringing the river rose the square tower of my father's church.

The spot once my trysting-place was now theirs ! I lurked in ambush, and fed on bitterness.

For a while only a darting swallow or a wandering bee stirred the quiet ; but at last, through the trees, the flutter of a white dress set my heart beating.

Tom Holford had not deceived me. The surprise I had prepared was perfect of its kind.

They followed the path threading the glade until, with the air of one sauntering carelessly, I met them face to face. I think the traveller of the Virgilian simile, who treads suddenly on the sleek and glistening snake, felt much as they did. I bowed, I think with exaggerated politeness.

To describe Oakton as looking like a fool, conveys but a feeble impression of his aspect.

On Sylvia's face a dozen emotions struggled for mastery, till shame and annoyance shared the honours between them. Yet I saw that she was taller, more womanly, and lovelier than ever.

"What on earth brings you here, Blake?" said

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Oakton, finding awkward utterance at last. "I thought you were at Oxford."

"There are coincidences nearly as wonderful as miracles," said I, "and this is one of them. The place might be called the 'Glade of Surprises.' Miss Carr, don't you think so?"

"Or of ambuscades," she said defiantly.

"Happened to meet Miss Carr, don't you know," said Oakton, fumbling for a plausible tale. "She was good enough to come for a stroll. Goin' to stop at the Rectory, Blake? Your people didn't expect you."

"My stay will be short," said I; "I must be in college before twelve to-night. Is your father well, Miss Carr?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"I fancied he had left Kelverton."

"Yes, I am staying with my aunt."

"I met Miss Carr at Kolverport last Easter," explained Oakton.

Sylvia held her head very erect, and looked straight before her.

"Indeed?" said I. "That was another coincidence. Once Miss Carr and I had some slight acquaintance."

"I have heard something about it," said Oakton, with an odd grin.

"It was no secret in Kelverton, was it, Miss Carr?" I said to her.

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"I scarcely remember," she answered.

Then came a pause in the conflict. Sylvia still looked straight in front of her. Oakton fidgeted a hole in the turf with his boot-heel, but I, affecting *debonnaire* amusement, and vaguely hunting a becoming policy in my mind, said—

"But I am spoiling your walk, Miss Carr. I remember you always appreciated this charming rural scenery. You won't think me rude if I go on. I should like to wish you good-bye, Oakton, before I leave. How soon do you think you can spare him, Miss Carr?"

"I've no need of an escort, thank you, Mr. Blake. Kelverton ambuscades are amusing without being dangerous."

"I'll be back before five," snapped Oakton, with a red face.

"All right, I'll wait for you. I shouldn't be happy if I didn't see you. Good-bye, Miss Carr; I hope you will continue to find sufficient distractions at Kelverton. There are some who think it dull."

"It's a dog-hole of a place," said the now savage Oakton.

"Good-bye, Mr. Blake," said Sylvia, but without looking at me. "I hope in future you will find scope enough for your surprise parties at college."

Then we separated. Glancing back at the last turn in the winding path I perceived that Sylvia



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was talking with extreme animation, whilst Cecil Oakton, unless his back belied him, sulkily listened.

When I reached the Kelverton road, I sat on a gate and waited for Oakton, who appeared sooner than I expected.

"I should like to know what the deuce you mean by prying into my affairs, Blake?"

"It's quite respectable curiosity. All Kelverton, except my father, knows that you are 'carrying on'—excuse the phrase, it's Kelverton's, not mine—with Miss Carr, and I am naturally anxious to avert a scandal."

"There's been one before, it seems."

"All the more reason then for sparing the parish another."

"I prefer a fellow to speak plain, Blake."

"I'll try, then. I suppose you are not engaged to Miss Carr?"

"No!"

"Then may I ask what it means?"

"You may ask, but I'm dashed if I see why I should tell you."

"Let me explain. You are at present living in my father's house. I might be obliged to consult my father, who would doubtless consult yours."

"You know what it means when a fellow talks to a pretty girl in a dashed dull place," said Oakton surlily.

"Not always."

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"Well, we're chummy, that's all. She's going back with her aunt to Kolverport to-morrow. On Saturday she joins her father in Birmingham. The scandal you are chucking at my head can't cover that distance. But look here, Blake, I'll drop this game as long as I'm living at the Rectory. Remember, if there should be a fuss, you won't come out on the top with a feather in your cap."

"You give me your word?"

"She's going away; so that's easy enough."

"I don't care what you do, Oakton, so long as you're not living in my father's house, but I won't stand still and see you make a fool of him. My share in the business is clear enough. Since you've promised to run straight, there's no reason why I shouldn't catch an earlier train."

Then I walked across the fields to the station, leaving him standing by the gate watching me.

Something tickled the fellow's fancy!

Of the whole brood of morbid sentiments jealousy, which survives a wasted affection as a scar does a burn, is one of the least amenable to reason. Against its assaults no shield avails, not even the power to laugh at ourselves. It dies hard too, possessing vital powers unsurpassed by any other bankrupt lodger in the soul. The kindred emotions of love's family may be nursed into comparative health on a low diet of subdued melancholy. But no man ever admits that he





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stables so vulgar and unheroic sentiment as jealousy.

But I was not jealous, only solicitous of my father's reputation! Yet there were men who, had they known what I had done, would have said, "Blake behaved like a cad!"



## CHAPTER XIV

MY last term at Oxford came in the same year as my vacation tutorship ended. My pupils were ripe for Burchester. Mr. Webb gave me a gold watch, "as a slight mark of esteem, and in recognition of the valuable services rendered to his sons." Mrs. Webb observed that she "hoped that I would not wait for an invitation."

Some of us know that watch; all of us know that invitation; not a few of us even accept it.

Meanwhile my father's educational duties, more strewn with thorns than mine, had ended six months earlier, when he had found it expedient to disencumber himself of his pupil.

"Mr Oakton," wrote Dorothea, "has taken to his evil courses again. We think that he has been borrowing money, for he is continually changing notes for ten pound."

In her later correspondence Dorothea referred to Oakton in vaguer terms of distress, as though his conduct were too unseemly to be chronicled in a maiden's letter. I heard, however, that he began



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to entertain the young bloods of the neighbourhood, sons of the tenant farmers, and articled clerks to country solicitors or auctioneers, at the 'White Hart' at Swilford. He was seen more than once, within a few yards of the Rectory garden itself, driving the pretty barmaid of a local tavern in a high dog-cart, the property of an eminent book-maker of Burchester.

Then there were occasions, over which propriety draws a decent cloak, when he returned to the Rectory imperfectly sober, and other harassing evenings when he omitted to return at all.

Kelverton, which likes to see the younger members of our aristocracy "show spirit," was pleased, but at the same time did not forget to hint that energy of this kind was ill suited to a country rectory.

Finally, my father, after vainly expostulating with his refractory pupil, wrote to his patron to admit "that his son was doing no good at Kelverton."

So Lord Oakton came down and wondered what "on earth could be done with the fellow!"

"Send him into the Army," suggested my father with the air of a man making an original discovery.

"But he can't pass!"

"He might get in through the Militia."

Then Cecil Oakton was consulted; said "he



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didn't mind having a shot"; in due course was provided with the expensive uniform of the Fernshire Militia, and for a few unprofitable months turned an indifferent eye on the glories of a military career from the study of a Kensington army tutor.

But this unprofitable youth was forgotten for my triumph. One August morning my father discovered in *The Times* of the previous day my name in the Honours List, and in the First Class. His approval was followed by that of Lord Oakton. An elderly Peer, with a wife forty-three years his junior, however kindly disposed, cannot be expected to remember a godson who is not judiciously advertised.

My surprise, therefore, was greater even than my satisfaction to receive from him a cheque for £50 enclosed in a congratulatory letter, inviting me to Kyneford House.

Thus sometimes the obscure enjoy flashes of popularity when the sun of success lights up their insignificance !

Lord Oakton was an old Brazenknob man. The master of the famous college, a distant connection of his lordship's family, had spoken well of me "as a young man of excellent parts and considerable promise." I was inclined to regard the gift and the invitation as due to my successes in "the schools," but my father attributed them



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rather to a desire to honour him in the person of his son.

"It is because Lord Oakton is aware how much I have done for his son," said he, "that he remembers mine so generously."

"Fifty pounds!" exclaimed Dorothea; "what a handsome present!"

But another letter which the morning post brought me added a fresh excitement to the breakfast-table. It conveyed, from Dr. Smythe, the offer of a mastership at Burchester. "It is only right," wrote the head-master, "that old Burcastrians should preside over the fortunes of their own school." He allowed me three months to decide.

As the stream of modest prosperity glided agreeably over me I remembered that, if Sylvia had only "been true," we might have been married next year.

"Lucky for you she wasn't," repeated worldly wisdom, whenever this intruding thought moved across my mind.

My father, seconded by my sister, urged me to take "Holy Orders," chiefly on the grounds that "no layman ever gets a decent head-mastership," but I refused on what are commonly miscalled "conscientious motives."

Perhaps as much as any distinct inclination, the stupid phrase, "There are three sexes—men,



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women, and clergymen," preserved me to the laity.

Now when I said, "I'm afraid I'm unfitted for the Church," it was not that it pleased me more than my fellows to cock a youthful moustache in the face of an admiring world, to wear russet boots of approved dandyism, and ties and garments of subdued but agreeable tints. But who can pretend to weigh his motives? Certainly not I. I only knew that the Church had no attractions for me.

But when Dorothea, who doubtless would have found a brother who was a prosperous scholastic parson a distinct personal convenience, was alone with me, she re-opened the discussion.

"Perhaps a year or two ago, Oakton, you were unfitted for the Church, but not now."

At this point, worldliness, sniffing at the compliment, showed its cloven hoof.

"The Church is slow and dull."

The words shot out of me like naked things needing decent draperies.

"Oh, Oakton!" she exclaimed reproachfully, "surely you don't want an amusing profession!"

"I'm afraid there isn't one. But the world is spinning along, and is some laps ahead of the Church. I want to jostle with the crowd in a front place, and feel the wind in my face."

"But, Oakton, isn't that a form of selfishness?"

"It may be. But I want some of the 'fat

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things' which, you know, Carlyle says 'the devil prepares for his elect.'"

"Like Cecil Oakton?"

"Not exactly. We shan't both feed out of the same trough."

My attitude of youthful cynicism was an affectation adopted to annoy Dorothea's priggishness, and was my form of the disease.

"It may be unfashionable," she said, "but I detest light views of serious subjects."

"I'm serious enough," said I. "I don't want to be a parson, especially as a commercial speculation. I'm not certain whether I shall accept Dr. Smythe's offer, and if I do it will be only to give the thing a trial. I don't quite see the fun of being a pedagogue all my life."

When I started to visit Lord Oakton, I was nearly persuaded that I had become a man of the world. Had I not learnt the all-mastering power of the absurd in the affairs of life, particularly in those of the heart? Never again should I expect an heroic display of affection in any woman.

At a dinner-party at the Hawthornes, a young lady, a stranger to Kelverton and its still un-forgotten scandals, had sung "Who is Sylvia?" but I was able to turn over the leaves of her music without blushing, although conscious that Dorothea exchanged meaning glances with Miss Hawthorne, and that a discreetly veiled smile was visible on



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the faces of the other guests who were acquainted with my too well-known story.

Lord Oakton had never invited his godson to Kyneford, probably because he considered him unworthy of the honour, but I had stayed there more than once with my father, when my tender years made me a guest of no account.

Looked back to, that journey seems a memorable one. I felt that I had made a becoming step forward into the world of men, and sat, as I felt was fitting, in a first-class carriage with my head in a cloud of youthful pomposity.

A groom met me in a smart cart.

"Have you a house full?" I asked, with the air of a man of fashion, accustomed to enjoy county society on an extensive scale.

"No, sir, only Miss Montfort, her ladyship's sister."

The road lay across a rugged moorland country, rising in the west into steep craggy hills. Kyneford Park, according to the local guide-books, the seat of the Oakton family for more than three hundred years, was ten miles south of the important coal-mining district which fringed the property, and compensated the owner for the fall in the value of his other rents. From the lodge-gates the drive ran for two miles through the well-tended sylvan fragment of an ancient forest, to the portals of a great, square-shouldered house of white stone,





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rebuilt by one of Lord Oakton's predecessors in the reign of George the Third. A portico and eight Corinthian pillars gave it that spurious classic aspect now associated with hydropathic establishments and kindred massive institutions.

The Oaktons had never particularly distinguished themselves.

"We are a family," my godfather once said, "who have missed our opportunities. Luckily it doesn't much matter for men of our class who are elder sons."

The Oakton chin, as seen in the family portraits, suggests stubbornness allied with a distaste for originality. Even wealthy aristocrats must "give and take," but the Oaktons could only "take." One or two of them had dabbled unsuccessfully in politics, where this stubborn feature had proved obstructive. The ablest of the political Oaktons had been a member of a sluggish and undistinguished Tory ministry, but he had quarrelled with his chief and resigned in a huff. Another had owed a Derby winner; and a third, whose portrait adorns the hall of my college, had published an indifferent translation of the *Iliad* in what flatterers described as "Miltonic blank verse." This is nearly all history has recorded of them.

My godfather had done nothing to raise himself above the monotonous level of ancestral achieve-



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ment, unless his second marriage with a young lady forty-five years his junior be regarded as evidence of enterprise. Most of his friends and relations considered it proof of senility.

When I arrived, Lord Oakton was sitting on an uncomfortable stone seat, watching two ladies on an ideal lawn, playing an unexciting game of croquet. He expressed himself as pleased to see me, and introduced me to Lady Oakton and her sister. They were alike, and exceedingly pretty in a restless manner new to me. Then leading me aside, he said—

“I dare say you wondered why I sent for you.”

“I thought it was very kind,” said I, feeling a little foolish.

“Well, the fact is I took rather a fancy to you because you made yourself a young fool over that girl. But I see you’ve pulled yourself together. I want to talk to you about my own boy. But go and make yourself polite to the ladies, and we will have a chat after dinner.”

I cannot remember whether the democrat within me was indignant.



## CHAPTER XV.

WHILST I was dressing for dinner, Cecil Oakton suddenly walked into my room.

"I heard you were here," said he, "and thought I should like to see you."

He sat down on the side of the bed and glanced at me with an odd expression, in which I thought I saw mischief. He looked older than he was, and premature dissipation had marked him for its own.

"No one expected you," said I.

"That's partly why I've come."

"You're not looking 'fit.'"

"I've been on the bust a bit—only a little bit, you know—and I've a good excuse."

I went on arranging my tie and collar, and watched him in the mirror.

"I've some news," he went on, "news that will make you all 'sit up.'"

"You haven't passed for the army?"

"I haven't even sent up my name. My life's too valuable for soldiering, now."

"What has sent it up in price?"

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I think I felt the shadow of what was coming.

"I'm not chaffing," he said.

"Well, what is it?"

"Guess."

"I can't. Is it a secret?"

"Yes."

"Between you and a lady?"

"You're growing warm, Blake."

"You haven't got into a muddle with the barmaid at the 'White Hart'?"

"Rather not!"

"Well, what is it?"

"I'm married, that's all—married to an old friend of yours."

"Sylvia Carr?"

He grinned assent.

"I thought it would surprise you a bit," he said.

Then I saw my own face change colour in the glass; the reflected room seemed to spin; and I heard the snaky voice of primitive instinct suggesting the justice of throttling the thievish bridegroom.

"How long have you been married?"

"Three days. It was at Birmingham, before the Registrar. The trick's done safe enough. Sylvia told me to tell you. As an old friend she thought you'd be pleased."

I felt the spite that edged her shaft.

"Where have you left your—ah—wife?"



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" Sounds strange, don't it ? Well, she's at home. I'm not of age for six months, so we thought we'd keep it dark for the present."

" Does her father know ? "

" No."

" That is—not so far as you know."

" Well, I'll lay odds Sylvia won't tell him."

" What's going to happen ? "

" Sure I don't know ! "

The demons of spite walked out of their corners and, encompassing me, began to take counsel as to what course of action would have the most unpleasant and immediate consequences for Oakton. Once more he was going to make me " behave like a cad."

But am I the only man who has been malignant when he ought to have been magnanimous ?

Cecil Oakton's obstinate chin suggested my plan.

" There is only one thing to do : Tell your father."

" What for ? To put him in a devil of a rage ? "

" He married again to please himself."

" So he did ! "

" Why should not you ? "

" Yes ; why shouldn't I ? "

Then we both reflected a minute whilst I brushed my hair.

The shadow of my duty to Lord Oakton gave my conscience the excuse it wanted.



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"I say, Blake, Sylvia's a ripping girl," exclaimed Oakton in a sudden spasm of commonplace rapture. "You know her, and can bear me out in that. She's not the sort of girl any fellow need be ashamed of! She is nearly as much 'class' as those Montfort people, and ever so much better-looking. She and I get on like anything!"

All my better sentiments were being pickled in vinegar, and I assumed the cunning heartiness of manner which best conceals the operation.

"She is all you say, Oakton, and I congratulate you. The news did surprise me at first, of course. I feel complimented—more than I can tell you—that Mrs. Cecil Oakton——"

"That sounds odd," he interrupted, wagging his head complacently.

"You'll get used to it soon enough. I do feel complimented, I repeat, that she should have wanted you to confide in me. Do you know why?"

"Not exactly."

"It is because she believes in my judgment."

"She always says you're a clever chap."

"She knows I'm to be trusted. Well, I'm convinced there's only one thing to do. Tell your father. It will save endless bother later. He will be much less angry than if you left him to find out for himself."

Oakton grunted dubiously.



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"You're not afraid of him?"

"Not a bit."

"Just think a minute. It isn't fair to marry a girl and leave her at the church door."

"I didn't exactly."

"Well, the Registrar's door, then. You place her in a most awkward position. Besides, there are a thousand and one reasons why you should be together."

"I do miss her frightfully!" said Oakton.

"Can anything be more ridiculous than that for a man to say of his wife? You have only to take the manly, straightforward course and tell your father this evening after dinner, and then you can go and claim her at Birmingham to-morrow."

"But Sylvia thinks we ought to wait till I'm of age."

"But she's naturally diffident. You mustn't be guided by her. She feels she has married into a family where she is not wanted; and I can quite understand that she might prefer to keep your marriage a secret even until you succeeded to the title. You are not ashamed of what you have done. You said just now that your father never consulted your taste when he married. A man is quite as capable of choosing a wife at twenty as at sixty."

"At sixty-seven you mean. My governor's sixty-seven."

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"The odd years increase the weight of my argument. There's no object in secrecy, that I can see."

"Well, Sylvia's afraid he might cut me out of his will."

"But he can't hurt you much, because of the entail."

"There's about £100,000 he can do as he likes with, although, of course, it ought to go to keep up the title."

"Your chance of getting that will decrease every month you put off telling him."

"Come into my room whilst I dress," said Oakton. "There's a lot of common-sense in what you say. Damn it! why shouldn't a fellow marry whom he likes, and when he likes?"

We crossed the great corridor to his room, and he began to hurry into his dress-clothes.

"It's an odd thing, Blake," he said, "but I always fancied you wanted to get your knife into me."

"I didn't know you were 'running straight' at Kelverton."

"You can't run any other course with Sylvia."

Then, as he dressed, I drew the whole story from him.

When Sylvia went to Birmingham they corresponded, but a few highly-coloured stories reached her from Kelverport.

"So she wrote to say that she didn't wish to hear any more of me," said he.



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This had the effect—the desired effect—of bringing him to Birmingham.

"I felt myself growing fonder and fonder of her every time I saw her," said Oakton, pulling on his pumps, "and all of a sudden on the platform at the station I said to her: 'Look here, Sylvia. It's no good going on like this. Let's get married!'"

But Sylvia raised some fragile defences of the traditional sort, and wished her lover to wait until he was of age "in order to be sure of himself." But Oakton, who also had the family chin well developed, "wasn't going to be put off." If "he didn't take care he knew very well some o' the lantern-jawed Methodist Johnnies would carry her off. He knew women, he did. 'Strike when the iron's hot,' that was his motto."

So finally, after some entreaty on his part, and, he wished me to infer, with many maidenly misgivings on hers, she consented.

But Oakton "only knew one fellow at Birmingham. A sort of trainer, a decent fellow enough, but an awful bounder, who, fortunately, 'knew a thing or two.'"

"Well, he saw me through," said the three-days bridegroom, hastily tying a white bow.

"If you had only told me in time!"

"We did think of you," said he, "but not exactly in that sort of way, you know."

"Well," he continued, "we dodged it so as to



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get in two days honeymooning. Old Carr fancied she was visiting her aunt down at Kelperport. How we rotted 'em! It makes me roar when I think of it. I haven't even seen my father-in-law!"

"He is quite a praiseworthy dissenter," said I, "with pleasing pulpit gifts. It's a pity he isn't a Churchman. You might give him a living then."

"At all events, I needn't tell every one he's not a real parson," Oakton answered. "After all, there isn't much difference in 'em at a distance. His blessing's every bit as good as a bishop's."

"And his daughter's excuse enough for anything," I interposed.

"By George! Isn't she? And she's just the sort of girl to keep a man straight!"

"And then what a splendid match she is making!" I exclaimed with equal enthusiasm. "Young women of her class rarely marry into the peerage. It's a comfort she deserves it."

"Oh, she doesn't care for that sort of thing a bit. She thinks one fellow's as good as another, and what's more, she believes it. Her father's in favour of abolishing the House of Lords."

"He'll change his views when he finds out there's a chance of his grandson sitting in it."

This jocularly amused Oakton.

"Oh, shut up, Blake! You're chaffing me!"

"Not I. It's a serious matter. Would you like

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me to sound your father? I'm a favourite of his for the moment. He sent me a cheque for £50 the other day."

"The deuce he did! He must be fond of you! I wish he'd send me one."

"May I sound him?"

"You'd give 'the show' away, Blake."

"I'll be most careful. Shall I try?"

"I'd rather do it for myself," he answered, suddenly remembering that I was interfering in his affairs, that which no Oakton ever could endure.

So I shifted my plan of attack.

"There's one thing we both forgot," I said. "If you tell your father, he might try to get the lawyers to annul your marriage. That might be awkward."

"I'd like to see him try," he replied, flushing angrily.

"I suppose you gave your right name to the Registrar?"

"I had to. They put you in 'quod' if you don't. Roper said so, and he knows."

"Then there's another point we overlooked," I continued, as he finished his rapid toilet. "The Registrar will write to your father, because you're under age. Officials are particular in the case of peers' sons."

This invention flustered Cecil Oakton.

"When one thinks of it seriously," I went on, "it does not seem worth while telling him at all. He's



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perfectly certain to hear officially. He may know already, and be setting all sorts of legal devilry in motion to get you unmarried."

"Damn it! So he might!"

"The law makes it unpleasant for minors sometimes."

"You're rubbing it in, Blake!"

"One can't blink at the truth, you know."

The obstinate mask now covered his face.

"It seems we might just as well have been married in Church, with orange-blossoms and all the rest of it," said he sullenly.

And now he was moving on the right path.

"It's a rather odd thing," said I, after a moment's pause, "that your step-mother and your wife are nearly the same age."

"Whatever sort of marriage mine may be," he returned, "it can't be nearly so idiotic as my father's. Lord! how sick they'll all be when I tell 'em."

The hand of the clock was on the point of eight as we went down-stairs, and met Lord Oakton in the pillared hall, where you could not possibly believe in the old armour and ancient antlers, so effectually had the later Georgian period obliterated all claims to antiquity.

I had heard Lord Oakton say, "The only excuse for the fool who rebuilt the place was that it would have fallen down if he hadn't," and I agreed with him.



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His reception of his son in the spacious but offending sham classic vestibule was not genial.

"Why did you not write and say you were coming?"

"I came down to see you," said his unabashed son. "I hope Lady Oakton's well."

"Quite well. But she has no taste for these surprises."

Young Oakton looked sullen enough when we entered the drawing-room.

"We are honoured, Cecil," said his step-mother, giving him some faultlessly groomed fingers to shake.

"A man ought to accustom himself to the house he'll have to live in some day, Lady Oakton. How d' you do, Miss Montfort?"

Cecil Oakton's idea of epigram was to throw a brick at you, but his step-mother pretended not to notice the missile.

Then we went in to dinner. Lady Oakton, smiling, took my arm and whispered sweetly, "Our Cecil's candour quite eclipses his amenities, Mr. Blake." Cecil walked after us with his hands in his pockets.

Lord Oakton's cook was famous, his wines not to be matched. Even at that age, I had an appreciative palate, but in the electric state of the domestic atmosphere I almost forgot that a stale sandwich had served as my lunch.



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Lady Oakton and Miss Montfort led the conversation, whilst I modestly assisted. But Oakton sat, twiddling his wine-glass (when it was empty), an unsympathetic listener, and his father, visibly annoyed, threw an occasional frown in his direction, and I think signalled to the butler to fill his son's glass with greater moderation than the restless movement of the latter's fingers seemed to invite.

In the dark corners of the room, away from the cheerful light, the silver, and flowers, mischief seemed brewing.



## CHAPTER XVI

WHEN dinner was over, Lord Oakton marched me into the library and sat me down opposite him, and said—

“You and Cecil are about the same age, I think, young Blake.”

“I’m a year older, my lord.”

“All the better. I have heard from the Master of Brazenknob about you. He says you’re just the fellow for my purpose. Cecil’s playing the fool. There are different ways of doing that—his is about the worst. He’s fond of low company, and picks up its slang. His views of life are all wrong. This sort of thing is apt to crop up in the family. There was my grandfather who owned ‘Fly Catcher.’ If my grandmother had given him a chance, he would have run off with his trainer’s daughter. Now I haven’t forgotten that you made a young donkey of yourself, but you stopped in time. You’re like a gun-barrel that has been tried, and are not likely to burst with a double charge. Now I want you to go for



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a six months' trip with Cecil—India, Australia, Japan, the United States, and all the rest of it. You will have to keep him out of mischief, carry the purse, and try to interest him in what he sees."

"Cecil won't come," said I bluntly.

"I shall give him no choice. He must. Now you go and talk it over with him, young Blake, and make him understand that I will stand no nonsense."

The Oakton diplomacy was of this order.

The weight of circumstance was steadily squeezing Oakton's secret to the surface. The wide impassive hall which I crossed had beheld the quarrels of several generations of Oaktons. Now only the distant click of the billiard-balls broke the pompous silence.

I found Cecil Oakton alone, smoking a briar-root pipe and practising the spot-stroke. At his elbow stood a tall tumbler. The faint reek in the air suggested that half-diluted whisky had lately filled it.

"Well, Blake," he said as he missed the pocket, "what did he want you for?"

"To go for a trip round the world with you."

"Did he? I can see step-mamma's finger in that pie. What did you say?"

"That I should be delighted, but that you wouldn't go."

"You might have told him the offer's too late,"





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"I thought that might be left to you. You are to have no choice in the matter."

Oakton "potted" the ball with a vicious stroke.

"After all, there is nothing really preventing you," I urged as he remained silent.

"How about Sylvia?"

"I forgot her for the moment. Shall I tell him you've married a wife, and therefore cannot come?"

"Thank you, I'll do that myself."

Then he threw down his cue, and began to walk round the table in an excitement which I did my best to stimulate.

"Lord Oakton means to have his own way," I said. "I wouldn't thwart him if I were you."

"Thwart him! It's time he learnt his will isn't the only one in the family."

"There's Lady Oakton's. I think she knows what she wants too," I suggested mildly.

"I haven't forgotten her, nor her trick of putting him up to things."

"That never occurred to me. But what message shall I take back, Oakton?"

"Tell him I'm damned if I go."

"You had better take it yourself."

"And so I will!"

"When?"

"Now."

"Now! Why, I thought you were going to funk it."



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"You'll soon see," he retorted as he walked off to the library, leaving me leaning on the billiard-table still dissatisfied, although my efforts to organize mischief were on the point of realization. As a parallel to the scene about to be enacted in the big library, I remembered that with my father in the study at home. The perspective of the drama had shifted somewhat ; but if the lovers were changed, the heroine was the same. Helen had discarded Meneläus for Paris, and Priam was doubtlessly raging ineffectually on the further side of the pillared hall which perhaps suggested these pedagogic images to my mind.

Thus I mused gloomily until a door, closing noisily, roused me. Cecil blundered across the hall savagely gnawing at the corners of his mouth.

And as I watched him I thought how easy it should have been for him to keep his temper. Was he not compassed about with independence, and his position impregnable ? Filial piety has been disregarded by more than one generation of Oaktons, and he was the unlikeliest of his race to begin a new family tradition. There was a father-defying roll in his clumsy walk and truculence in his prominent blue eye.

"You've helped me make a nice mess of it," he growled.

"Why ! what did he say ?" I asked innocently.

"Oh, he's sick of me. I may go to the devil as

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soon as I like. I said there wasn't a train to-night, but I'd start to-morrow. You should have seen him! He looked as though he were going to burst."

"Well," said I consolingly. "You never expected him to give you his blessing. At any rate you know the worst."

"But I didn't want to know it. No fellow ever does. When a man wants that he can't do better than come to you. A splendid adviser you are!"

"You'll find that I was quite right when you have thought it out. Besides, your wife will reconcile him to the marriage."

"Will she? I'll take good care she don't. I tried to make him understand she was a girl any man might be proud of, but he shouted: 'Hold your tongue, you young fool!' So I told him I didn't care a damn what he thought, and that a fellow was quite as capable of choosing a wife at my age as his. That fetched him frightfully. He ordered me out of the room. We shall never speak to one another again. So that's settled."

Then he walked round the table till the heat of his anger cooling somewhat, he rang the bell and said—

"I want a drink! It will be the last in this house."

"I hope not," said I sympathetically.



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"The last, I mean, until—you know when, Blake."

I did, and so held my peace. He was taking it badly. Feebleness and vindictiveness visibly shared him. For a youth whom accident allows to act as he likes he seemed sufficiently ridiculous, and I wished Sylvia could have seen him as he stumped round the room, beating the polished parquet noisily with the loose heel of his pumps. At last he stopped and faced me.

"Look here, Blake," he said. "You helped me into this muddle, so must help me out. I know you have some coin, so lend me a 'tenner.' When I get to Birmingham that fellow Roper—the chap who 'best-manned' me—will help me 'raise the wind.'"

I handed him the top note in the little bundle which I had received for his father's cheque at the Kelverton Bank. I wonder how much confidence ten pounds can purchase in the market of distrust, for the opulent rustle of paper removed the suspicions from his eye.

"Hang it, Blake, you're not such a bad chap, even if you ain't the big diplomatist you think."

He crumpled the unfolded banknote in his trouser-pocket, among his loose silver. But the door opening, I left him with a strong whisky-and-seltzer and the butler to counsel him on the subject of morning trains, traps to the station,



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telegrams, and the other difficulties of an unblessed departure. There was something oddly farcical about it. When the melodramatic sire quarrels with his heir he sees him to the door and curses him on the step, generally in a storm, but I left young Oakton arranging matters with the obsequious guardian of his father's cellars.

"So you're off to the ladies, Blake," he cried after me. "My love to step-mamma. I'll introduce her to her daughter-in-law by marriage whenever she likes. We're not proud."

In the drawing-room were Lady Oakton and her sister, stirred to no great depths by the storm.

Had I heard the terrible news? Lady Oakton had never seen her lord so moved before! It was so bad for him, too. He ought to be protected against great excitements. Nothing could be more inconsiderate than Cecil's conduct! There never was a more indulgent man if he were taken in the right way. She was persuaded I knew this. Was it not a dreadful thing for a young man to marry out of his class so outrageously as poor deluded Cecil had done? What hope of happiness could there be from such a match? She shuddered to think of the future of the unhappy youth, and so on, and so on. But grief left her composed. Miss Montfort, comforting her perfunctory emotion with inadequacy of phrase common to indifference, admitted "that it was annoying."



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"Annoying, my dear Muriel. Lord Oakton was almost purple when he told me. He has already written to his lawyers. We are only at the beginning of the miserable business. As an old friend of the family, Mr. Blake, I am sure you sympathize with us."

"Most profoundly, Lady Oakton."

"I believe you know this young person, Mr. Blake?"

I assented with invisible uneasiness.

"What is she like?"

"She is considered very pretty."

Miss Montfort pricked up her ears. Like not a few pretty women, she needed the strongest evidence before believing in the beauty of others.

"The plump dairy-maid style?" she supposed.

"When I last saw her she was tall and slight with regular features. She may have changed, of course."

"Whatever her looks she must be a designing and vulgar young person," said Lady Oakton. "No self-respecting girl, even of the lower middle class, would lay herself out to entrap a boy—for Cecil is a boy in spite of his bulky appearance. I at least can see no excuses for her."

The "at least" was a reproach thrown at me.

"I suppose it is human nature for a clever ambitious girl to wish to marry out of her class. Her father is a dissenting minister."



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Then Lady Oakton seemed to account for "the blow," on the grounds that the young woman could have no real religion.

And so the conversation circled, with small profit, round Cecil and his marriage, until the ladies retired to sleep off the shock.

My own rest was troubled. Jealousy had two stings, one for the future, the other for the past and both were busy with me. But I cannot remember wondering whether "I had acted like a cad."

## CHAPTER XVII

CECIL OAKTON woke me next morning. He was wearing, I remember, a sporting suit of a defiant pattern, which seemed the fitting attire for a rebellious son of his type.

"I'm off," said he, standing at the foot of my bed.

"Where to?"

"Birmingham first, of course." Then, after a little look round, "I suppose we shall turn up in London."

"Anything I can do for you?"

"No, thanks; you've done quite enough for the family. If step-mamma talks a lot of 'rot,' you might put in a word for me. She'll say a good deal. He won't say much."

"Your father, you mean?"

"Yes; but of course he'll put the 'screw on' where he can. Luckily there isn't much scope for him in that line. Between them you'll find Kyneford about as lively a place to stay in as an asylum for idiots on a half-holiday. But 'bye-bye.'



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Take care of yourself. I'll try not to forget the 'tenner.'"

"My congratulations to Mrs. Cecil. Tell her I shall not forget her kind message."

He gave me a parting grin, and started to join his bride.

Looking from my open window across the sunny park, a few minutes later, I saw the cart disappearing down the long avenue, whilst the fallow-deer, knee-deep in the bracken, watched the departure of the man who would one day have a right to shoot them with no more interest than if he had been a discharged footman. Something dramatic was expected, but nothing occurred. The element—whatever there was of it—had been exhausted on the previous evening.

But was I happy? The scent of the tall lilies, grouped in masses in the flower-beds below, reached me, and I remembered how once their odour had driven me to apostrophize Sylvia in verse—

"My stately lily, tall and fair!"

She was fair enough, but how ridiculous the simile now seemed! She could read my idiotic poetry to Cecil Oakton now, and they might laugh at me together!

But what of Mrs. Cecil? Is an ambitious girl of the middle classes who is raised to the peerage likely to regret the price she must pay? Sylvia

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had succeeded all along the line. Equipped with feminine cajoleries for all emergencies, her complete social armoury would win her many another triumph, whilst I, the rejected and now derided lover, must struggle for my bread in a nameless crowd.

And thus I mused as I dressed, but after breakfast, at which no member of the family appeared, I learnt that "his lordship desired to see me in the library."

Lord Oakton was sitting by the open window; his face bore some traces of his recent conflict. He looked as though he had slept ill; under his florid colour you could see that yellow tinge, the companion, perhaps, merely of a trifling indigestion, but which sometimes heralds the approach of jaundice.

I sat down opposite him and he began at once.

"Well, sir, you have heard?"

"Yes."

"What do you think of it?"

"I'm not a fair judge, Lord Oakton. Three years ago I wanted to marry her myself."

"I wish the devil you had!"

"I was a school-boy, and couldn't."

"I remember seeing you weep about her. You were a young fool, but an honest one."

"You told me all men were at some time or other, my lord."



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"Fools, yes ; but not honest ones. What is the girl like ?"

"Very pretty, very clever, and very ambitious."

Lord Oakton weighed my estimate a moment, and then said—

"Young Blake, tell me all about this affair of yours. I have reasons for asking."

So I told him my foolish story from the first meeting to my final and ignominious dismissal on the beach at Kolverport. Perhaps my then vividly-remembered emotions gave colour and feeling to my words, for his eye grew kindlier as he listened.

"She treated you like a little minx," he answered, only used a coarser term. "But though you deserved all you got, you were honest and liked the girl, for I can see you are jealous still."

"I swear I'm not, my lord—that is, not exactly."

He was almost amused for a moment.

"Yes, you are. No fellow ever confesses he's jealous. Pity they didn't let you marry her. After all, for a parson's son to marry a dissenting preacher's daughter is not outrageous."

"My father thought it was," said I.

"I remember he did. It was absurd of him. I told him so at the time, and he didn't like it. Oh yes, there were excuses for you, but for this fool of mine! Listen, young Blake. Do you know why he married her ?"



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"A girl like that could do what she liked with Cecil."

"He married her to insult me—simply to insult me."

Lord Oakton's temper, which had run away with him yesterday, was now under perfect control, but his eye glowed, as you may see the eye of a vicious horse glow when it only thinks of the kicking-strap. But he was not a man for a youth of my age to console, so I said nothing.

"If," he went on, after a frowning pause, "he had fallen into the trap laid for him like a wrong-headed innocent lout of a boy, I might have forgiven him, but he didn't. The bait which caught him she never set. Well, he has done for himself so far as I'm concerned. I never want to see the cub again. He can go to the deuce his own way and take the dissenting baggage with him. But I gathered from what the idiot said that it was you who induced him to tell me. You were quite right. I shan't forget it."

But here a servant announced that "Mr. Fletcher had arrived."

Mr. Fletcher was Lord Oakton's lawyer, so I withdrew, leaving the field open for sterner manoeuvres, and ere long gathered from the fact that my signature was required to a stamped and taped document, that some hostile movement had been carried out against the disobedient heir.



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Then there came two uneventful days, during which I amused myself in the park, or played a most scientific game of croquet with Miss Montfort or Lady Oakton, until on the fourth day of my visit the bridegroom dealt a backhand blow at Kyneford, and all its past and present glories. For I read in the *Times* among plebeian matches the following announcement—

“On August 15, at Ebenezer Chapel, George Street, Birmingham, by the Rev. James Pugh, assisted by the Rev. Theophilus Carr, father of the bride, the Hon. Cecil, sole surviving son of the Rt. Hon. Lord Oakton of Kyneford, to Sylvia, only daughter of the Rev. Theophilus Carr.”

Lady Oakton was standing on the terrace, and I took her the paper. Her face grew vicious as she read it.

“How unnecessary, and how vulgar!” she exclaimed. “Even the commonest people are married in churches.”

Then she carried off my discovery to Lord Oakton. Poor old fellow! I was sorry for him. Either the announcement, or the consequent congratulations it called down on him, hurried on the impending attack of gout, for he took to his bed, telegraphed to his London doctor, and I saw no more of him. His illness cut short my visit, and I returned to Kelverton to comfort my father, whose



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peace of mind the startling paragraph had also completely wrecked.

But after discussing the marriage for a week and becoming weary of hearing Dorothea reiterate, "What a shocking thing! Poor Lord Oakton! There's one thing, such a marriage cannot possibly bring happiness," I decided to spend a part of my godfather's gift on a trip to Norway, in the company of an Oxford friend, and exported to the blue fiords and gleaming glaciers the cryptic jealousy which smouldered within me.



## CHAPTER XVIII

THE belief that man's future lies in his own hands is a popular article of faith invented to keep hope alive, and to spur jog-trot effort into a less unbecoming amble. But each generation passes on this time-worn illusion to its successor, although even the successful, unless very dull, disbelieve it. For the vanity we call ambition insists on riding us towards a receding goal.

When, in all the pomposity of untried youth, I had told Dorothea that I wanted my share of the "fat things" which Carlyle's devil "prepares for his elect," within decent ethical limitations, I meant what I said. But five years later the "fat things" were as remote as ever, although I had become as reasonable as a mastership at Burchester could make me.

It is, or was, the practice of certain journals intended for the enlightenment of our youth, to permit ladies and gentlemen who fancy they have achieved something, to give their reasons for "embarking" on their particular career. These



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confessions appear to comfort the writers, as talking about oneself in public invariably does. It is acceptable fodder for the self-conceit that at least has carried them somewhere. But "embarking" is often the least unpleasant part of a voyage. Too frequently it is followed by exceeding unpleasant consequences.

Among the minor discomforts, both of seafaring and "school-mastering," of which Burchester produced the usual crop, the weariness bred of monotony is found. But to look back is to discover the compensations which were invisible when we scanned the future. They may be seen only in the dull grey light of unexciting comparison. The repentant convict, in the enjoyment of liberty, is, believed to find a few of them even in the period of his penal servitude.

Burchester, like every other venerable and self-respecting focus of enlightenment and polite learning, has views of its own; and, as an ancient Burcastrian, I have always been keenly conscious of their value. But after granting all its claims it still remains a respectable planet in the scholastic firmament, and cannot be magnified into a brilliantly rotating sun, capable of absorbing a swarm of hot-tailed comets in the twinklings of a modest star.

In the Burcastrian prospective "The School" looms very large, even the bishop and the cathedral





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taking a second place. There even is danger that the Burcastrians who keep the altar fires alight may mistake the decent rays they feed for the central fires, whose eclipse would disarrange the harmony of a universe.

I have known grizzled pedagogues with a respectable university career behind them, mistake our somnolent whisper for the great growl of the world beyond.

Burchester has evolved its own codes out of its own traditions, its own slang; from this well-prepared soil its own rather flat and stodgy humour has quite naturally grown. Those who desire to retain their individual form and colour must seek safety in flight; those who remain, end in measuring the universe by the Burcastrian foot-rule. From this fate an accident saved me.

I might—following Dorothea's example, who married Dr. Frampton-Jones, the youngest canon of Burchester, a man whose fame a beautiful profile had extended even beyond the confines of the diocese—have taken to myself a wife, become a portly house-master, and attained prosperity from my boarders' fees, but some acuter powers of resisting that sluggish form of temptation seems, in my case, to have obstructed the natural processes of the place.

It was agreed that I diverged from the usual

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type. The daughters, sisters, and wives of my colleagues, I am told, whispering together, used to say, "Mr. Oakton Blake has a past!" Dorothea, who disliked this rumour, hinted strongly that marriage would conduce both to my prosperity and respectability, whilst her husband urged the wisdom of taking orders, on the grounds that I might have the living at Kelverton some day for the asking. But whilst I hesitated, growing steadily wearier of vainly teaching the elements of Latin prose to Lower Form lads, or ineffectually guiding them through the giddy mazes which the ingenious Greeks invented for the discomfiture of succeeding ages of indolent grammarians, there came a bitter winter, which carried the influenza on its frozen shoulders. The arrows fell at random over the land. One smote my father; in spite of his seventy years he had never been seriously ill before, so he fought it, and in defiance buried the victims slain in his own parish. But at last an arrow smote him; he took to his bed. A heart that has beaten for threescore years and ten is tired; so one cold night it stopped, and the next morning Dorothea, who was nursing him, sent me the sad news.

We laid him under the old yew-tree in his own churchyard. His son-in-law, with full round voice, read the burial service. A week later scarcely any one outside the parish, save Dorothea, myself, and



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Lord Oakton, remembered he had ever been born. For death was very busy ; the black processions moved across the snow-bound land, and the mourners, acquiescing, shed what tears they might, and deplored the inefficiency of a science which could not protect them.

Lord Oakton, now older and feebler, wrote kindly. "Failing health," he said, "and his doctor's orders alone prevented him from following his old friend to the grave." He added : "What has taken him is waiting for me." Then I thought almost tenderly of the old man with his young wife and unforgiven son, who heard the rustle of death at his library-door, and went to Kyncford at Christmas to see him.

"I am seventy-two," he said, "two years older than your father, and I begin to feel that I have had my innings."

Cecil Oakton was living in London. Rumour said his wife was a great social success. Once, in the preceding summer, on a brief visit to London in the half-term, with one of my smarter colleagues, I saw her driving in the park, brilliantly dressed. She seemed a being from another sphere after the Burchester ladies, whose toilets came from the High Street.

Lord Oakton consulted me as to the choice of my father's successor. I suggested the Rev. Herbert Jones, Dorothea's brother-in-law. "All

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right," said his lordship, "he shall have it; but he's a bit of a prig, and it's a pity I can't give it to you."

The spring following the winter was cold and treacherous. The registrar boasted of the eccentricities of the death-rate. The whole school coughed and sneezed; Dr. Smythe in his four-post bed was unable to bully the "Sixth" over their Greek play, and passed them on to me. The term was known in the school records as the "sneezer" year. Perkins major, "a splendid 'Rugger' full-back," died of inflammation of the lungs. His tragic fate awed the whole school.

In my own history the year was a momentous one. Death, who tapped Perkins major on his robust young shoulders, claimed a still more distinguished victim. The Corinthian pillars of Kyneford could not keep out the epidemic. It entered and laid low old Lord Oakton. His wife, seeing her splendours wane with the flickering life-fires of her husband, sat day and night by his bed watching. But there came a bitter March morning. The fallow-deer, leaving the wind-swept park, were shivering behind the barns and out-houses, for Nature's blood ran feebly in the veins of life. And as the east wind hissed round Kyneford suddenly, Lady Oakton, seeing a stealthy change pass over the apparently quietly dozing invalid, touched his hand and found it was very cold.



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"He has fainted!" said the nurse.

"He is dead!" said the doctor, when he came.

Two days later I received a letter from Mr. Fletcher to say that I inherited £50,000 under Lord Oakton's will, and the grey walls of Burchester, and the snowy playing-fields beyond, turned for a moment into billowy shadows of reality as the wave of selfish joy swept through my brain.



## CHAPTER XIX

THE prisoner, freed from a dungeon, and led by friendly hands into the happy light of day, blinks confusedly in the sunbeams. But the first shock of his delight is brief, for he claims the air and the sunshine as his right. Similarly, however much astounded by my legacy, after the first half-hour of tumultuous gladness, I could not admit that affluence and ease were not my due, even though an accident were necessary to ensure them. It seemed that a giant hand, loosing a lucky spring, had shot me up high above the heads of ordinary toiling Burcastrians, into some genial atmosphere where I was made king of my own destinies. A hundred new tempting voices sang in my ears. What was there within reason that I could not do? Which of my tastes might I not gratify now? "Henceforth," whispered the most insistent voice by my pillow, "you can do as you like. You needn't go to chapel to-morrow, or bore yourself with a dull 'Form,' incapable of mastering the Greek irregular verbs." So my fancies began to riot over the fair prospect. The Greek verbs called



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up pictures of the sunny Levant, of blue Ionian islands, of foam-washed Italian shores, of classic Capes, to which the romantic scholar turns in his dreams, but rarely sees outside his author or the Classical Dictionary. The world, once an indifferent step-dame, requiting tedious duties with a niggard hand, had changed into an indulgently smiling mother. Was I to become a spoilt child in Fortune's careless nursery?

And thus I remember musing on the uncertain confines of dreams, until the next morning dawned cold and cheerless, with the east wind tearing through the leafless branches of the lime-tree before my window, and then philosophy, clutching at my flying skirts, tried to save me from myself. "What is there in the possession of two thousand pounds a year capable of changing all things for you? The world is the same place to-day as it was yesterday, and will be to-morrow. Be calm, riotous folly!" But I had studied the problem of self too well to heed this voice, and, although the readjustment of the disordered particles had commenced, these flying atoms were now illumined by the ethereal fire burning within me, which I might have recognized as the soft flame happiness kindles to keep up the selfish temperature of the soul.

But now there were tangible realities to be dealt with. The Monfort family, and Lord Oakton's poor relations were as displeased with the will



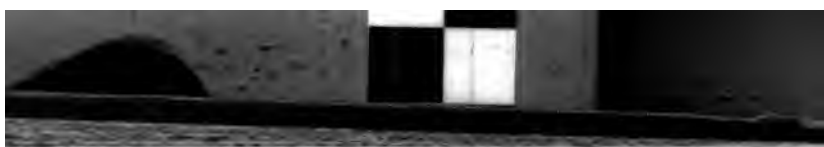
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as families generally are when the testator has followed his own inclinations, and defied theirs. The young Dowager naturally begrudged me my share of the spoil, although the heir did not regret to see half the legacy, which he had ceased to expect, elude his father's widow.

I met Oakton at Kyneford at the funeral, at which my presence had been politely "desired." When I saw him, and noted the coarser lines in his face, I did not forget how jealousy had once made me hope that "Sylvia would repent marrying him," and wondered what old skeleton their joint lives might now conceal.

"You don't look a day older, Blake," said Oakton. "Bullying little boys seems to agree with you. Five years since we met, is it? What! only five? Seems an age since I was married! O yes, thanks! my wife's all right, and the 'kid' too. Not a bad little chap either! Don't fancy we're annoyed about this legacy, because we ain't. Of course it all ought to have been mine, except a trifle for the Dowager. Rather young and pretty for that, isn't she? There's no proviso in the will about marrying again. That must have been an oversight on the old man's part. But perhaps he meant to let her have another chance. She's very sour about your share of the booty, though! Told Fletcher the old man left it you to score off me. He got it into his head that you'd been badly treated by a certain lady, whom I needn't name.





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Rather a neat idea, isn't it? You *can* get a fellow in a will sometimes."

And in this candid manner the new Lord Oakton surveyed the situation, and the life and conduct of his predecessor, before the funeral procession started for the little church in Kyneford Park, which served the Oaktons as a private cemetery.

The English, who are popularly believed to take their pleasures sadly, are capable of bearing their sorrows with tranquillity. Three months before I had seen my father, with a strange dull pang, half sorrow, half remorse, laid in his grave. Next I had heard the frozen clods clatter on young Perkins' coffin-lid, whilst his brother's sobs fell thick on the bitter air. But here in the quiet, unvisited Kyneford churchyard, there was a shower of gold to comfort me. In the dark vault where the heavy oaken coffin was lowered, lay the roots whence my own hopes blossomed. The burial service was never read over a man, no matter how kind and good, unless some one was the gainer, and strove to silence the clamorous outcries of his satisfaction. By the new graves of the great, even beside the carven and weeping angels, stand the draped shadows of profit and loss, invisible presences which may be felt. The long line of tenants kept solemn faces, but stared furtively at the impassive chief mourner, and thought of leases renewed, or rents remitted.



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When I returned to Burchester, the Doctor, my colleagues, the whole school, and the ecclesiastical side of Burchester society, received me with the respect and cordiality £50,000 naturally excites. I had been longing for some change to give my life the vivid sense of swing and progress that it lacked, but now that "the fat things" had fallen into my basket, a small but bitter apple of regret lay on the top. It was of the growth that resents change. Burchester had claimed more than half my existence as a boy and master. The shadows which the grey cathedral tower and the venerable school had cast across my path, had suddenly vanished; yesterday they had loomed before me as tedious obstructions. To-day their menacing monotony had vanished. In its place was the memory of wholesome living. Even the pompous new chapel seemed an old friend.

Before the end of my last term the school gave me a farewell dinner. The Doctor took the chair; all the masters were present, the captain of the school, and other representatives of the "Sixth." The Doctor's speech, which may be read to-day in the back number of the *Burcastrian*, where it is printed verbatim and the quotations identified by footnotes, was regarded as a masterpiece of after-dinner oratory. He had not forgotten that once, in what he might call my "untamed youth," I had promised to be *impiger, inacundus, inexorabilis*, but Burchester had tempered my fire with her mild



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philosophy, and I could now take rank among her worthiest sons.

Then my career was sketched, and my points praised, till the Doctor drawing eloquence from his fires, glowed over my prospects. I was leaving my Alma Mater—"the kindly mother who had given me her culture and accepted loyal service in return"—on what he understood to be a prolonged tour in classic lands. The Doctor's hearers knew how well equipped I was for the noble pilgrimage! But *laudabunt alii claram Rhodon*—if ten years' intimate knowledge of my tastes and character belied me not, he was convinced Burchester would never be forgotten. Outside the friendly precincts I was leaving, there lay before me, he trusted, a not inglorious career. I had youth and health and hope as allies; I had browsed, not without finding sustenance, in the classic pasture-land, and he wished me "God speed" on my journey. Wherever I went the friendliest wishes of my colleagues would accompany me.

And so my health was drank; the gentle stream of flattering platitudes swept over me, and I said what I might in thanks, yet could not forget the part that my £50,000 played in raising me out of insignificance.

That night I slept in my Burchester room for the last time; on the following day I started for Rome, and on the first stage of a new life.



## CHAPTER XX

ONCE, in the olive season, I blundered across the orchard of a sun-dried, underfed Italian peasant, to the inappreciable damage of the crop of fallen berries. Some deep agrarian wrong in the man must have been stirred, for he raved at me. The disproportion between his anger and my offence was incalculable. A few small coins, however, and such apologies as a limited vocabulary permitted, more than atoned for the injury, and sent him to the other pole of feeling. He beamed like a courteous walnut. "Milord was most gracious!" Smiles led to an exchange of confidences. I was a traveller seeking pleasure. And finding it? Yes, in his beautiful land. Then the wrinkled man looked over the wide, sunny prospect of grey-green olive hills. Pleasure, said his face, rarely came his way. Then I learnt there was a son with the army in Africa, and at home, in the arid village, a wife—a crone. I saw her before her door, a bundle of gnarled miseries, weeping for the second lad crushed to death in the marble



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quarries and buried yesterday. Yet all the man's powers of mind and body were concentrated in the poor patch of olives where we stood. Here was a tragedy in the thinnest key of sorrow—attenuated as a bat's cry of discomfort. Death on one side, the consolations of minute thrift as an anti-climax on the other; to bridge them over was the old mother's grief. All the wrinkled man's philosophy of resignation was squandered on his son; none was left to help him over his olives.

Then I can remember thinking that it must be the theatrical and literary view of life which makes it so unintelligible. Fear of death, fear of hunger, and love are the three elements from which vicissitude weaves crude tragedies. They may begin with death, and end with a quarrel over an undertaker's bill. We clamour for poetic justice and "dramatic" curtains to hide the sordid ugliness clinging to most human troubles.

We flatter ourselves that we know ourselves, but because we never find similar enlightenment, or the desire of it, in any other atom of humanity, our teeth are set on edge. A few chosen ones, and the unhappiest, climb to the mountain summits and flash their beautiful signals of distress over the misty valleys. These deviations from the ordinary type we call poets. We laugh at them when they are alive, but when their beacons are bright enough we build monuments to their



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memory after they are dead. But the few churlish fellows who try to tell us the truth, we dub pessimists, and stone with the stones of critical derision. We do this because all extension of self-knowledge is to the disadvantage of vanity.

But what other lessons did travel teach me? Until a man can see the sun rise and set without entangling the phenomenon with his own theatrical emotions, he has not learnt much. I admit that my own philosophy was never deep enough at that age to enable me to sit on an ancient promontory without desiring, faintly and shamefacedly, for some "kindred soul" (of the other sex by preference) "to share in my emotions." Still there were days of blissful solitude when I could walk through fields of flowers without aching for any of the rosy-bosomed apparitions with which youth peoples all fragrant and lonely places.

But how incomplete is an education which teaches nothing of life and its laws! We pen our youth up in schools and colleges, and mould them in the same mill till they come out as much alike as cartridges of the same calibre. We need a deep bath of solitude to teach us our real place in nature.

But I shall never know whether I learnt mine, although my wanderings had shaken off the semi-ecclesiastical dust of Burchester.



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London has a strange fascination for most Englishmen; one most felt, perhaps, when we are beyond its shadow, and the cavernous glooms of its vastness trouble us not, and the ruddy glow of its life and movement is alone remembered. And so I drifted there. London and Sylvia ought to have been at the remoter poles of my thoughts, yet fancy strangely associated them, chiefly because the Fleet Street reporters flashed her personality on me as "Lady Oakton of Kyneford," in the fashionable intelligence. But she was forgiven. The antiseptics, time and change, had killed the poison. But the change which had taught me philosophy had stifled much of my enthusiasm and most of my ambition. When I heard Big Ben strike midnight, in my chambers overlooking St. James' Park, I never stirred in my bed, because the deep tones repeated, "None of those who hear my voice know your name."



## CHAPTER XXI

THE force of attraction which drew me to London also found me a peace there among the old Burchester and Oxford men who had preceded me. Some of these, nibbling more or less ineffectually at the skirts of the law, had pitched their tents in the Temple; others were learning to be men about town—a profession for which amiable indolence appears the chief qualification—but most of them seemed to have less vague purposes in life than myself.

Moving cheerfully in this circle of old acquaintances I rediscovered Eversley, who, after being invalided home from India, had left the Army, recovered his health, and was now playing at being a barrister.

We met where most old Burcastrians do meet, at the Polychrome Club, which has numbered two generations of "old boys" among its members, and which still measures the universe by the Oxford variant of the old Burcastrian standard.

Eversley's humorous, half-sly eyes twinkled at





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me inquisitively, and seemed to say, "I have heard odd things about you, Blake." Probably he had, for Lord Oakton's legacy had made me the object of some interest in Burcastrian circles. Once at Burchester a young lady, touched doubtlessly by some sentimental but inaccurate record of my earlier career, had observed to Raggett, the mathematical master, that she never could read *Locksley Hall* without thinking of Mr. Blake. "That," as Raggett had observed at the time, "was the sort of thing which stamps a man."

Eversley at once reverted to old times.

"You were awfully down on your luck, Blake, when we last met."

"Yes. It was at the 'Crozier' at Burchester. We exchanged confidences about our love affairs, and drank too much wine."

"You're not married, Blake?"

He knew quite well I was not.

"No," I answered, "are you?"

"I can't afford it," replied he with reproachful emphasis.

Then he explained that he was "working up a practice at the bar," and that "he went out a lot and got seen at places."

The Countess of Appledor was his mother's half-sister. She was of "a literary turn." The phrase well describes the nature of her talent. The article "By a Society Leader," on "The Decay

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of Modern Manners, and the Capture of Genteel Society by the Newly Enriched," which created much stir in the columns of *The Ladies' Wallet*, "emanated," as a half-penny paper informed the world, "from her practised pen."

Her nephew had followed very hopefully in his aunt's wake, ever since she had introduced him to the Solicitor-General at one of her own "At Homes."

Eversley discussed his chances at the Bar with much candour, and made me understand that he possessed every qualification for success except industry, whilst I observed that I had never yet known a man who had danced himself into a practice.

"Ah! you misunderstand me, Blake," he said. "I'm only keeping my eye on the right sort of people. For instance, I'm going to Sol Brookes' to-night!"

"Who's Sol Brookes?"

Eversley looked at me in pity.

"My dear fellow, where have you been all these years? The millionaire, to be sure."

"The man who lives in the great stone house off Piccadilly with the gilt Mercury at the top?"

"Yes. He's the man, and a 'pal' of mine. I got my aunt, Lady Appledor, to go to his parties. 'For my sake, aunt, you must,' said I. 'For your sake I will,' she said, 'but I hope the man won't



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expect to be asked to Rockcombe'—that's her place in Devonshire, you know. But Sol gave her a tip about an investment, and now she speaks of him as an 'honest fellow, and one of Nature's gentlemen.' Sollie was so pleased with me that he has promised I shall be 'briefed' the very next time his financial honesty is breathed on in the papers, so I spend half my time with my nose in the money articles. Look here, Blake, come to-night. He's always pleased to see my friends. When he hears you're Lord Oakton's cousin he'll double your income for you, if you'll let him. He isn't nearly such a 'bounder' as fellows pretend. Mrs. Brookes may want to know who a man is, and have a poor opinion of artists and writers and fellows who try to make a living out of their brains and think no 'small beer' of themselves, but Sollie, never! 'What does it matter who a chap is, old gal,' he says to his wife, 's' long as he be'aves like a gentleman!' Even Sol's millions can't stifle his human nature."

The millionaire interested me.

"I should like to go, Eversley, only Lord Oakton isn't my cousin."

"Why! I thought Lord Oakton was your uncle."

"No, the relationship was entirely spiritual. He was my godfather."

"I wish he had been mine. That's why he left you a fortune?"

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"He gave no reason for the legacy."

"Some one suggested it was to spite his son for marrying against his wish. It strikes me, though, that it was the wisest thing that duffer ever did. I can't remember who she was, but she's about the handsomest and cleverest woman in London. She is almost certain to be at the Brookes' to-night. Every one goes there now."

A man can no more manufacture excitement out of the quiet of his own environment, than an urchin, ignorant of the laws of chemistry, can produce an explosion with sixpenn'orth of sulphur and a dash of saltpetre. In both cases the result at best is a mere make-believe fizzle. His big excitements are a man's meteors, but he cannot produce them out of squibs!

After seven passionless years the prospect of meeting again the only force that had derailed my equanimity, experimentally, as it were, and as a test of philosophic manhood, made my heart beat with an odd swing of emotion.

At dinner I induced Eversley to talk of the millionaire, his history, growth, and progress, and when we were driving to his house we were still discussing the simple story.

Mr. Solomon, or as he preferred to be called, Mr. Sol Brookes, was the son of one Baruk, who came from Bremen, and settled in the East End of London as a "general dealer."



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"When I first heard of Solly in Burmah," said Eversley, "he was still Baruk, but the natural elision of the *a* was about to produce 'Bruck.' He was then negotiating with his Majesty the late king of the country for mining rights, but he had already pulled the string, and a golden shower had begun to fall. When he turned up in Calcutta he had two or three ruby mines up his sleeve and some odd millions in his pocket. There happened at that time to be dwelling, not far from the Chowringhee, at a hostelry much frequented by sea-faring gentlemen, in the capacity of barmaid, a lady of some personal charm, whose name was Juanita Fernandez, and whose birthplace was Goa. Now Mr. Brookes has reddish hair, and is of the type which the brunette strongly attracts. Miss Fernandez from Goa had under her brown skin the rich dusky glow more admired in temperate zones than in those nearer the tropics, where it meets with disparaging criticism. It may have appealed to Mr. Sol Brookes because he was a connoisseur in rubies, and had no Anglo-Indian prejudices. When he was plain Mr. Baruk, Miss Fernandez, I am told, had refused him, but Mr. Brookes, with his millions, was a financial Achilles. Directly they were married Mrs. Brookes at once decided they must go 'home.' But she did not mean the Eurasian abode of her childhood, but London which she had never seen, and so, in due



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season, the Brookes towered above our horizon, and built themselves the lordly palace where they will entertain you this evening. They ended in conquering, for Sollie is a cloud-compeller who insists, like all his kind, 'on good value for his money.' But you will see for yourself, Blake, how popular he is!"

For our hansom, which had taken its place in the long line of carriages which were setting down guests before the marble portals of the millionaire's magnificence, stopped in its turn, and the glow of the electric lights, the lilting of a jubilant string band, and the glimmer of plumes, diamonds, and silks streamed out on the bleak darkness of the muddy street.



## CHAPTER XXII

"DID you ever see anything quite so prosperous?" asked Eversley, his mind's eye fixed doubtlessly on his dusty chambers and the mouldy stairs leading to it. "And to think that the little chap hasn't even had to sell his soul to get it. What flowers!"

There were regiments and brigades of them storming the wide staircase; faint pink roses from the south, for the light cavalry, swinging lilies for the white standards, dark red carnations, and all the brightest spoil of the Rivieran slopes for the rank and file.

"What lovely flowers!" murmured the rustling ladies whom we followed up the great marble stairs to the entrance of the reception-rooms where radiant footmen, in powder and silk, waved us on.

We were announced in our turn. Mr. Brookes was "pleathed to thee any friend of Everthley's"; Mrs. Brookes was equally satisfied, only in the accent which Anglo-Indians describe as "Chi-chi."

But the stream of guests swept us on, and I took my station under an eight-foot palm to watch.

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The chosen ones of the Stock Exchange were there, men whom no splendour can dazzle and whose brains are active spasms of mental arithmetic; literature, too, and the recording pen of journalism—always adventurous—were represented; nor was Art—both long-haired and short—absent; nor the quiet patronage of the more enterprising aristocracy. Yet it was a gathering which even the meekest guest might have described as “mixed,” and at which the envious and uninvited might comfortably sneer. Here, on high heels, was an Eastern Minister, in red fez and tight frock-coat; there, a solemn Chinese Envoy in flowing robes. And of ladies there were many types, from the smartest worldlings, all white neck and arms, to the wholesome matron in decent high bodice and an early eye on the “refreshments.”

As the rooms filled, the volume of chatter swelled into a buzz such as one might hear if an ant-hill grew articulate, or our ears acquired microphonic powers. The shifting colours of the dresses, the sparkle and gleam of jewels, the flutterings, the murmurings, were as mesmeric passes, producing in me that sense of detachment which relieves a crowded room of its oppression, until a footman's voice in a more pompous key announced “Lady Oakton of Kynesford.” Then something stirred in me as Sylvia in the splendour of womanly beauty which her charming girlhood had promised, entered





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the room. Above her thick brown hair a spray of diamonds caught the light which sat and danced there like bubbles of fearless prosperity. The loveliness of her neck and arms surmounted a dress of daffodil silk, and my fancy, just as it had done when I was a love-sick lad, chased my memory for classic similes to calm it.

"That's your godfather's daughter-in-law," said Eversley, "and she's the handsomest woman in the room, bar none!"

When she saw me I thought I read a welcome in her eyes.

"I should have known you anywhere," she said, "though this is scarcely where I expected to find you."

"In the strongholds of a millionaire, Lady Oakton? It does seem odd."

At the end of the room were vacant chairs, and we sat down, whilst one of the bravest "lions," a new tenor, sang Schubert's "Adieu," and, as he sang, my memory, working backward, called only the charming side of things. A wider experience had flung overboard all the ridiculous cargo.

But when the song had ended, and before the applause had ceased, Lady Oakton desired to know what I had been doing since I had left Burchester. "Rumour," said she, smiling, "has described you as a modern Ulysses seeking the Blessed Isles."



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"Wouldn't the parallel of his son Telemachus be more appropriate?" I suggested.

"Of course it would. I meant the blameless Telemachus."

"Well! I have travelled a little," said I, "but without adventures."

"Without one? Have you escaped Calypso's island, Mr. Blake?"

I might have told her how my ship had been wrecked on the fatal promontory long ago, but I said instead—

"Nothing ever happens to me—now."

But Sylvia—for I could not think of her as Lady Oakton—saw the foolish path to which the retrospective "now" pointed, and looked another way.

"But since you are back, why have you never been to see us?"

"Some form of shyness must have prevented me."

"Shyness with old friends! I want to introduce you to my son."

"I should much like to see him. He must be a dear little lad. Is he fair or dark?"

"Don't tempt me! Fair, with little gold curls round his eyes and face. They must all come off soon. He is getting too old for them."

Ancient jealousy, now dead of atrophy, did not even grudge her her boy.

"You see," she explained, "little Cecil wants his



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hair cut, because he thinks it makes him look like a girl, and his father agrees with him."

"So between them," I suggested, "they will have their way. But is Lord Oakton here?"

"No. When he wants to see Mr. Brookes he dines with him. He sold him a race-horse the other day."

"Yes. 'Torpedo,' who ran second in the 'Eclipse Stakes.' The papers chronicled it."

"So even you have an eye for the sporting column, Mr. Blake. Lord Oakton was proud of the 'deal,' as he calls it. He is to be a director of one of Mr. Brookes' new companies."

"I had no idea that he was interested in financial operations."

"'Interested' doesn't quite describe his attitude. But he has a taste for directors' fees."

"Rather a dangerous one to cultivate sometimes, Lady Oakton."

"If an innocent peer isn't safe in the hands of an honest millionaire then half the population of *Debrett* are in jeopardy."

'But whilst we talked of the straws drifting on the currents about us, of the new tenor, of Mr. Brookes' rubies, "supposed to be the finest in Europe," and of other matters remote from old emotions, I grew conscious that Sylvia was studying me. Occasionally a question went straight to the point, and a swift inquiring glance followed it,



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noting the effect. For a woman easily forgives the jealous resentment of the lad over whom the triumphant car of her beauty has rolled. As plainly as the tone and manner could suggest a meaning, Sylvia said to me that evening, "If you will forget the Kelverton nonsense, we may be friends." Then came faint glimpses of confidence. She spoke of her father, "busy in Birmingham, with what she believed was called in the Establishment an 'important cure of souls.'" Social changes, she seemed to infer, may dislocate filial relations without destroying them. The Rev. Theo. Carr always stayed with his daughter in Portman Square when the meetings needed his presence in town.

"I remember," said I, skirmishing experimentally with her outpost, "that your religious views did not exactly coincide with his."

"His have remained fixed," she answered, "whilst mine are still fluid."

Then she shifted the grounds and "wondered what I proposed to do." Nothing? But she had understood that I was ambitious. What of "that last infirmity of noble minds?"

"Dead of atrophy," said I.

That she thought a pity. There was such a chance for able young men now.

The London County Council, I supposed, was opened to most of us—at least as candidates.

But had she not heard—she fancied from some



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one who had met me at Oxford—that I was thinking of literature—"on its more romantic side?"

Then recalling the lines I had addressed to her and even published at her afterwards in the *Freshman's Garland of Verse*, I blushed. But recovering speedily I told her that verse-making had been flung overboard with other bales of useless vanities.

"Vanities," she thought, "like feathers, might be made ornamental."

"There is also great risk," said I, "that they may be ridiculous. There is only one thing in England that never can be ridiculous—and that is prosperity."

"If," she said, "by prosperity you mean success, I quite agree with you."

Then she asked me for my address, and said that I must lunch with her, and that she would write and fix a day.

A little later she left with another great lady to go on to the Duchess of Belaster's reception in Grosvenor Square, and Mr. Brookes, whose quick eye had noticed her cordiality to me, remarked that "hith friend Oakton's wife wath a real lady of fashion, and that he had no idea I wath her cousin."

Instead of dispelling his illusion, I accompanied him at his own invitation, to "'ave a nithe glass o' thampagne."

## CHAPTER XXIII

GROWTH resembles re-growth with a difference, and Sylvia and I had an ugly broken gap to bridge over, a feat of moral engineering demanding delicate handling on the part of the contractors. Conscience is a more fragile moral organ than theologians have taught us to believe. By taking a little thought the dullest can smother it. If there be a satisfactory definition of repentance I am unacquainted with it. We are all of us a little like Hamlet's uncle, and repent after the object for which we have offended has been gained.

I had not seen Sylvia many times before I suspected some vague sense of regret was the cause of her gentleness to me. Her keen wit and a sharp tongue were never exercised on me. Might I not assume this to be a tacit confession that she had "treated me badly," and that she was "sorry for it?" Most repentances have no more obvious manifestations. You rarely see the candle and the sheet. It is true that I had once called her a "little pink and white traitress," but that was an affront which most women with delicate



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skins are capable of forgiving, and Sylvia's complexion was unimpaired. Besides, she could always look back to the Kelverton nonsense as a perfectly innocent distraction for a pretty girl in a dull parish. A woman easily pardons herself for far more heinous offences against the callow affections of youth. In our quiet and quite undramatic reconciliation I found flattering inducements. Who could tell what her thoughts were? Did she ever tell herself that, but for a chance meeting with the impressionable and dull son of a peer, she might have married me? Of the "might-have-been" applicable to the common chances of her lot and mine, a series of not uninteresting combinations might be made.

Following this simple line of thought a man easily persuades himself that "he is the victim of Destiny,"—a fate as meaningless as it is comforting to self-esteem, for it assumes that "destiny" has made especial efforts to prevent us obtaining what is justly due to our merits.

Lady Oakton and I could only be friends or nothing. She might have ignored the unassuming idler chance brought under her notice again, yet she smiled on him and took him under her fashionable wing.

Gradually, by piecing floating fragments of gossip together, and by inference based on her own suggestions, I was able to make a fairly



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complete picture of the campaign she had fought to win her position. An unintelligent blunderer would have been beaten and fallen back into the rank and file of good-looking women who had married into the British aristocracy, and been lost there like motes in a sunbeam.

The Dowager Lady Oakton—now the wife of the Reverend and Honourable Apsley-Page—had been first to scatter the social ratsbane. When she had been asked who the new Lady Oakton might be, she had not missed her opportunity. Mr. Carr was a “Ranter,” who preached from a tub in preference to any other pulpit; his daughter, a designing girl, who had inveigled a dull and vicious youth into premature matrimony, and broken his father’s heart in consequence.

But this crude sort of mud-throwing had no serious effects. A few great ladies—the Duchess of Belaster for instance, an old friend of the late peer’s, who had quarrelled with him for marrying again—felt called upon to patronize Sylvia, but discovering that it is not easy to patronize a witty, spirited, and, above all, charming young woman, they ended in liking her for herself. Finally, Sylvia, in spite of her husband, who was so faintly interested in the conflict that he was scarcely aware that it was taking place, won all along the line, and made herself a brilliant and almost impregnable place in society.





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She had expected to fight and to win, and after her victory, was forgiving. When the Dowager put off her weeds and returned to the world with subdued clerical lustre as the wife of the distinguished and well-born High Church divine, rich enough to build a great church for himself at Kensington, and to defy his bishop with a florid ritual of flowers, incense, vestments, and with what the Rev. Theo. Carr described as "other papistical philanderings," Mrs. Apsley-Page found it convenient to make the acquaintance of her stepson's wife, and I was impressed to discover that Lady Oakton had become "dear Sylvia," whilst little Cecil was "her little golden-hair." For nothing is easier to kindle than the warmth (customary as well as useful in society) of families akin by marriage.

It was, however, Mrs. Apsley-Page who first hinted to me as "an old friend," that there was a black cupboard in the Oakton *ménage* where the family skeleton rattled its bones.

You may be a peer of the most candid *Sporting Times* type, yet shall you not escape calumny. If you chanced to be in the smoking-room of Oakton's favourite resort, 'The Boot and Spur Club,' when he happened to leave, the chances were that you heard both the rumours which ran after him. The one interesting men most was to the effect that he was a polygamist in a monogamic age; the other, the simpler and cruder statement

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that he "drank." Oakton was a large-framed, lethargic man, and I had not forgotten that he took more wine and other stimulants than necessary for ordinary refreshment, and I remembered that the other weakness also cropped up occasionally in the Oakton blood. To me it seemed that he had become at twenty-nine what he promised to be at eighteen.

But was Sylvia disappointed? Disappointment depends on expectation, and I do not think she expected too much. The lady who weds Orson scarcely hopes that the marriage service will convert him into Valentine, however much she may believe her own "refining influence" will diminish the horror of his shaggishness.

But when ugly rumour, or something more definite than rumour, troubled the domestic calm in Portman Square or the pillared stateliness of Kyneford, I wonder what Lady Oakton said to her husband. So long as the stubborn course of his self-indulgence was unopposed Oakton was manageable enough, and Sylvia knew this better than I did.

The renewal of my acquaintance with Sylvia was not a year old when she began to take an active interest in what she was pleased to call my "career." If by the word we understood any definite form of progress, old Lord Oakton's legacy had brought this to a full stop.



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Sylvia's luncheon Sunday parties were famous. It was understood at the Polychrome Club that they were reserved for the entertainment of witty or distinguished people, and I heard that Underton, who had edited the *Freshman's Garland* when I had contributed to it, unable to class me under either head, was "surprised that I should be invited." The Polychrome is full of delicate media for the circulation of mischievous rumours. But Underton was right. I sometimes wondered, too, why I was a guest at these smart gatherings, especially when Sylvia introduced me to the more or less famous, and set them wondering "what on earth I had done!"

Although old Burcastrians like Eversley might be persuaded that I still entertained a hopeless passion for Lady Oakton, the clearer-sighted saw in our relations the juxtaposition of patron and patronized. She "took me up"; I profited by it socially a hundredfold, and intellectually not a little, for Sylvia's beauty and wit were stimulating. But whilst her powers of charming me remained, my power of loving her like an unreasoning boy had been modified. In the readjustment there was no continuity. All that remained to me from our past relationship was the faint aroma which clings to the earliest stirrings of the emotions.

It was after one of her Sunday luncheon parties that Sylvia, having conveyed the hint to me that

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I was to stay on when the other guests had departed, made her great effort to start me on a real career.

"I want to talk to you seriously," she said. "Come up-stairs."

Then she led me to a pretty room overlooking the square, and sat down in a low arm-chair with her back to the window before a blazing fire of coal and logs. Outside the east wind was whirling the dust and hissing through the bare trees behind the iron railings.

"Now what I wish to say to you, Mr. Blake," Sylvia commenced, "involves personal criticism!"

She glanced at me over the small Japanese screen which she held between her face and the fire. Behind her head the sunset was glowing over the chimney-pots.

"Criticism," said I, "does no harm unless it is flattering."

"Well, mine isn't. The fact is, Mr. Blake, you are wasting your time. Even Cecil has noticed it."

The idea of Oakton deploring my leisure amused me.

"We can't all be Directors of Companies and keep race-horses," said I. "You can't waste that which has no use, so I'm innocent. Besides, people want intelligent spectators. There isn't room for us all on the stage. Some of us must



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sit in the pit and look on, or where will the applause come from? It can't all be supplied by contract."

But Lady Oakton was not to be put off by levity, so she answered reproachfully—

"But you did well at Oxford, Mr. Blake, and certainly wrote some very pretty verses."

Woman, adored or upbraided in rhyme, especially when they have some sense of humour, hold a sort of mortgage on the poet, against which they can draw when they like.

"You promised me to forget those 'wicked iambics,' Lady Oakton."

"I won't refer to them again if you will take up a more prosaic profession. Perhaps you are aware that I am a politician?"

"I know you are a pillar of the Primrose League, and have not forgotten that the Home Secretary delivered in your drawing-room at Kyneford a speech which the newspapers described as 'a political utterance of great importance.' I read all about it in Rome."

"Politics are less ridiculous than you think, Mr. Blake," said Sylvia, with a faint inflection of reproof in her voice. "It is a great pity Lord Oakton takes no interest in them. The family influence is still considerable, and I should not like it to die out, for little Cecil's sake."

Her son was exercising his rocking-horse in the

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adjoining room. We could faintly hear the swing of the rockers.

"In the next twenty years," said I, "the democracy are likely to swamp a good many other things besides little Cecil's weight, in the Kyneford division of his county."

"Mr. Blake, you are a pessimist. Clever people when they are idle often are."

"Isn't pessimism," I asked, "rather the religion of the unsuccessful? The man who can't be saved, flatters himself when he believes the thing's impossible."

"But I want to save you, Mr. Blake," said Lady Oakton. "Surely you don't believe that the mob is always to have its own way in England?"

"The mob can bundle along somehow if you find it a few fairly reasonable leaders, Lady Oakton. And just now it has no taste for political 'skylarking.' Every breeze across the seas frightens it with the smell of gunpowder. You ought to make little Cecil a soldier, not a politician; it's a worthier trade. When I think of the average Member of Parliament, my civic heart quails with misgiving, although, as *The Times*, with its usual candour, said yesterday, 'our Legislature is the ablest in the world,' and it must be true."

But Sylvia was in no mood to discuss politics on free and easy principles.



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"The Duchess of Belaster," she observed, ignoring my chatter, "says there will be a general election in June. She heard it from the Duke, who had it from the Prime Minister."

Dukes and Duchesses had become such common objects in Sylvia's life that she could allude to them without the shadow of pomposity. Adaptation to environment is swifter in the social than the biological world, otherwise promotion would be impossible.

"So soon?" I inquired.

"There's absolutely no doubt of it, and unless something is done, Mr. Abbott will have a 'walk over' for the Kyneford division."

"A majority of 800 is a lot to wipe out, although I fancy Abbott's constituents are a little tired of his windy talk. He hasn't done anything for the miners except make promises, and we can all do that. Some one ought to have a shot at the seat."

"Exactly," said Sylvia. "I want you to. Every bit of Oakton's interest is yours, of course."

And this was Sylvia's object! My regeneration was to be through the portals of Parliament.

The Kyneford division was one of those on which the obscure candidate is allowed to whet his political axe, and to find his reward in the advertisement. His speeches fill columns in the local paper, and may even find brief record in

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dim corners of *The Times*. However much his ambition may be frustrated, ever afterwards he can talk (to his wife and daughters by preference) of his "public life," and glory in the bundle of press-cuttings, the sole record of his political campaign. But with this picture on my mind, Lady Oakton's proposal only flattered me moderately.

"But you want a strong politician to fight Abbott, not a dabbling amateur," said I.

"One never dabbles when one's in earnest," returned Sylvia reproachfully. "You will win your spurs at Kyneford."

And I was ashamed to say that I did not want any. Of every argument I advanced to show my disqualification as a parliamentary candidate, she found a flattering refutation. Had not I just now shown her what the average Member was like? Something of a glorified vestryman, was it not? Throw in a dash of law, I had said, and you had a fair sample of the man his wife thinks a statesman. Surely I wasn't frightened of such competitors as these! Then the Kyneford division was not an expensive one to contest. Kyneford House and all its resources were at my disposal. The more she thought of the matter the more she was persuaded that I was destined to make a mark in public life. Whether I won or lost, the effort she expected of me would be only the





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beginning of a brilliant career. And then was not something due to the Oakton family? The late Lord Oakton had always regarded me as a young man of promise. His will was evidence of that. Bequests of that kind carried duties with them. Ah! if she had been a man! She would never have contented herself with sauntering through the world as a spectator, under the illusion that she was philosophizing when she was only making herself comfortable. To fight and win gave life its best zest and enjoyment. Any shallow pate could sit outside the arena and laugh at the combatants. But that was no place for Mr. Blake! And so on, and so on, until I interrupted her onslaught and said—

“Don’t scold me any more, Lady Oakton. I will do all I can to win back the Kyneford division for you, but not because I think I’m the right man, but because you asked me to.”

The genesis of my proposed candidature came to light later. The little knot of local politicians who touched the hem of the Primrose League, and hated the Labour Caucus which disposed of the Mining Vote, could find no one eligible who was willing to stand, unless they guaranteed expenses. When Lady Oakton heard this, she promised to find a candidate, and so I was unearthed!

My consolation is that better men have been

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chosen to do dirtier work on less flattering grounds.

Since I had been promoted in society as "one of Lady Oakton's young men," there was no reason why I should not drift into politics under the same distinguished patronage, but, as Oakton subsequently remarked, it was only fair that I should "give 'em a run for their money."

A fortnight after my capture by Lady Oakton, *The North-West Gazette*, Mr. Abbott's organ in the county, devoted a crushing paragraph to my audacity.

"A rumour has reached us," said the journal with the dignity of a cloud-compeller, "to the effect that a Mr. Oakton Blake, said to be a connection of the Oakton family, and who is believed to have distinguished himself at a University, intends to contest the Kyneford division of the county at the approaching general election. It is, we think, a little strange that some less obscure individual was not forthcoming to oppose the able statesman who now so splendidly represents our interests at Westminster. But a general election gives the midges and gnats of politics a chance of buzzing, which they vastly enjoy. It would, we think, be in better taste to allow our Member to be returned unopposed, and we can only think that this futile opposition has been got up to allow a 'greyfly to wind his sultry horn,' or, to quit the



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language of metaphor, in order to permit a young gentleman of whom no one has ever heard, to advertise himself at the expense of the constituency."

I had never been abused in print before, and took the paragraph to Lady Oakton.

"It seems to me libellous," said I.

"Not at all," said she. "It is complimentary, indirectly. Don't you see that you are making them uneasy? You had better subscribe to the agency for press-cuttings."

And so I did, and have now a fine collection.

## CHAPTER XXIV

UNDER perfectly healthy conditions even a woman's prejudices die out. In the end the general who wins battles earns the approval of the less lucky rivals over whose heads he has passed. Success is the most natural focus of respect among a practical people. There may have been a moment when my sister Dorothea persuaded herself "that she forgave the woman Lord Oakton was fool enough to marry," but I have no record of it. Dorothea's feelings, however, underwent an apparently quite natural change. When she saw in the papers that Lady Oakton had been presented at Court by the Duchess of Belaster, she admitted that the "little dissenter was turning out better than she expected." From this to grudging admiration was but a step.

When the Frampton-Joneses heard that I was to contest the Kyneford division, they wrote to me to express relief that I had at last found "an honourable and congenial field for my talents," and informed me of their intention to come to



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Town for what it pleased them to call "a little change."

Dorothea had social aspirations which society at Burchester had not completely satisfied, nor were the Canon's eloquence and fine profile so well known in London as they deserved to be.

I wonder whether Lady Oakton remembered the time when Dorothea had passed her in the Kelverton lanes, with her head in the air. If she did she took no ignoble revenge.

When I casually observed that my sister and her husband were at a West-End hotel, she not only left cards on them, but followed up the honour by an invitation to an "At Home." How facile are the conquests of the great! From that day the Frampton-Joneses became Lady Oakton's most eager champions and defenders.

"Your brother-in-law is much interested in you," Sylvia observed. "He thanked me very prettily for recalling you to that 'sense of public duty' which ease and indolence at one time threatened to undermine."

"The sentiment," said I, "sprang from my sister's brain. The Canon set it to words."

Meanwhile I had taken up the electioneering business with much energy. Most of my time between April and June was passed at Kyneford House. Sylvia petted, flattered, and amused me, planning with myself and agent all manner of



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underground political mines to destroy Abbott's hold on the churlish division I was preparing to storm.

It was under these harassing circumstances that I first met Evelyn Hayward, the most beautiful and charming of all Lady Oakton's friends. Usually Sylvia robbed the women at her side of their lustre. There was never glitter and sparkle like hers. Yet I was conscious that a metallic element was faintly discernible in her radiance when the shadow of displeasure fell upon it. She loved justice as much as most women, but I doubted whether she would be magnanimous enough to practise it under strong temptation. I have seen her looking like a Madonna in little Cecil's nursery, but caught the flash of a civilized Moenad in her eyes in the drawing-room when her malice barbed her wit.

Although we delude ourselves by comparisons, the inevitable contrast between the two rose in my mind.

"Our friendship," Lady Oakton, who perhaps guessed it, explained, "is rooted in dissimilarity, although Evelyn Hayward can wear my dresses."

Sylvia took you by storm. You read victory in her eye and movement. But it was impossible for the incurious to overlook Miss Hayward in a crowd of smart people, for the same reason that made them see Lady Oakton.



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It was Lady Oakton herself, who was readier to criticize than to praise other women, who first excited my interest in her friend.

"Miss Hayward," said she, "lives with a Miss Cartrew, a much-travelled aunt whom I detest, and who hates me in return, so I see much less of Evelyn than I ought."

Then I thought Miss Cartrew must be a lady of considerable originality of character, and remembered her vaguely in association with a book of travels.

"Evelyn," continued Lady Oakton, "catches impressions like quiet waters, and flashes them back like a mirror. Her brain is clear and her heart kind. She is the one pretty woman I know able to avoid convention without posing."

"Yet," I observed, "she is still unmarried."

"She has, so far, escaped it. Her habit of saying what she thinks is ill suited to promote domestic bliss."

"Does marriage, like popular politics, need the graceful concealment of truth on the part of the contracting parties to make it work?" I asked.

"You know it does, as well as I do," said Sylvia, smiling.

"I long to meet your paragon."

"You will in a few days. But you won't care for her."

"No?"

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"Hardly. She is interested in the wrong thing at the wrong time, and so escapes vulgar popularity."

But one lovely May afternoon, after a tedious morning misspent in currying favour among suspicious local politicians, I was introduced to Miss Hayward on the lawn at Kyneford House, and knew Lady Oakton's forecast was wrong.

From the terrace we could see over miles of blossoming thorn and apple-trees.

"There is no May like an English May," she said; "and three days ago I was in Florence."

"You think so because you carry Arcadia with you," I replied with the usual lack of originality.

But I was just then a long way from Arcadia, and knocking my head against an obstinate constituency with a muddle of half-intelligible prejudices for an ideal.

There is to political freedom as to religious liberty a ridiculous side which ignorance and folly have learnt to organize. The division had developed a number of foolish and noisy cliques to whom a general election was a festival. In the Kyneford division these were numerous enough for polling purposes to be important. There was the Anti-Vaccination League, the Society of Utopian Brothers with Universal Arbitration on the brain, and the State Pensionists with a wild-goose scheme for plundering the thrifty classes for the benefit of





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the human spindrift which the winds of necessity blow across the social seas. These fad-ridden people had been barking at Abbott till he had snapped back effectually, and my agent was eager that I should swell my poll with the foolish fragments which fell from my rival's table, and when I demurred, proceeded to prove to me that Providence never intended an election to be an exercise in human candour.

But how I should have liked to "get at them" like Abbott did !

"But, my dear sir, you can't afford it !" cried my agent emphatically. "Every young candidate must temporize a bit. It's the rule of the game."

But Abbott certainly relieved his mind. He was, he said, a plain man with no sympathy for nonsense. If children were not vaccinated, in the end the public must be poisoned by small-pox, and if he had his way the neglect of this sanitary precaution would be punished with the utmost rigour of the law. Only a fool would reason with an Anti-Vaccinationist. As for the Utopian Brotherhood, there was a big bee buzzing under their bonnet which any one could hear without placing his ear against the ground. If they wanted to reach down the millennium with a penny cane he wasn't going to join in the silly game ! Then came the State Pensionists. All he could say of them was that he was a man of business. Government

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existed for the purpose of carrying on the affairs of the country, not for making feeble experiments in fantastic philanthropy or half-hearted socialism. Those who wanted the sky to fall had better take the hat round to the other side—"to Lady Oakton's young man," cried a voice from the audience—"and see whether they would help them to catch the larks!"

This speech sent all the little groups of scrambling *doctrinaires* trotting round to us.

"Don't be impetuous," pleaded Sylvia. "Their votes are good. They are telling one another Mr. Abbott is 'no gentleman.' There is also some doubt whether he is a 'true Christian.' Let all these odd people see the philosophic side of your politics."

"You are keen, Lady Oakton!"

"I don't intend Mr. Abbott to represent the division permanently. If we can't win the seat, we can at least give it a good shaking."

This conversation took place in the library at Kyneford after my agent, who maintained an attitude of conditional hopefulness, had departed. I confess that I was beginning to feel a little helpless and bewildered after addressing two or three meetings a day—some of which were unpleasantly hostile.

"Never mind, it will be soon over," said Lady Oakton, sympathetically. She was a splendid



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canvasser. Her victoria with the big bay high-steppers flashed like a meteor over the excited country-side. Once only I accompanied her. We were driving through a mining village. The men from their doorways grinned a little aggressively. "There goes Lady Oakton an 'er young mon," cried one fellow, and the whole village roared. The subtle irony left Sylvia's face untroubled. She was too well accustomed to her position to care. But the gibe stuck to my memory like a burr.

"People of that sort," she said, seeing my flushed face, "are always a little brutal, but they all admit you are making a splendid fight."

If shouting platitudes to indifferent or rude audiences till my voice cracked meant "making a good fight," she was right.

Whenever I succeeded in keeping a meeting in fairly good temper, we pretended at lunch the following morning that I had had a triumph. Oakton took a jocular and sporting interest in the election, was willing to bet 3 to 1 on Abbott, and "didn't see the slightest reason why he shouldn't lay odds against his wife's horse if he fancied the other."

The agent thought Mr. Blake's methods a "little too refined for the average voter of a mining district," but maintained his attitude of conditional hopefulness. The band of energetic gentlemen whom Lady Oakton had brought to Kyneford to

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fight my battles were certainly not open to this reproach. It vexed them that no humiliating label could be attached to my opponent, who was merely a very vigorous Philistine. I was "Lady Oakton's young man," but who was he? We battered him, of course, all over the division with the usual abuse and depreciation. Whilst, we said, Mr. Abbott had openly pretended to promote the interests of the Mining Accidents Insurance Bill, he had secretly done his best to assist the mine-owners to wreck it. How was a man like this to be trusted? But I was a modern Brutus without the dagger! The safety of the British Empire was closely associated with the return of Blake. Then "Lady Oakton's gang," as our opponents called the relentless speakers who were losing their voices in my service, proceeded to promise and vow all manner of things in my name, until there was scarcely a fad extant in current politics to which I was not ready (if elected) to give "my most earnest and serious attention." For instance, I discovered that the ardour of my friends had pledged me to promote a scheme of State pensions of ten shillings a week "for every *bonâ fide* working-man or woman who had put in thirty-five years' solid work." One of my meetings, in the words of the local reporter, "broke up in some confusion," because I explained that what I meant was that I was prepared to



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"consider" the project, not to actually "promote" it. Some of the pensionists in consequence declared their preference for Abbott's "frank brutality to Blake's Jesuitry." The only "factor," as my agent, who was fond of the word, called it, on my side, was that remarkable political phenomenon known as the "flowing tide," which is a magnificent euphemism for popular caprice in the bulk.

But how I was harassed and badgered and bullied! How I began to hate all the tiresome busybodies whom electioneering drags from their wholesome obscurity. Where is there an ass like your political ass?

Electioneering I found debasing to my intelligence as well as dangerous to my common honesty. Political heat begets the spontaneous lie.

As the polling day approached, even the stately and well-ordered life at Kyneford House gave way before the pressure of the noisy conflict. After the day's fight, the gentlemen, in the smoking-room, discussed the incidents of the day to their own glorification. In these smoking-room records of the fray all the wit and humour was on our side. Of course we were never "scored off."

Oakton said there was only one fact of which he could be sure, and that was that he was the only man in the place who hadn't cracked his voice.

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"Get fog-horns next time," said he.

The last week of the contest seemed an ugly dream. The weather was perfect, but I dwelt in dust and confusion of mind and body. Ours was the winning side in the country if not in the division. As polling day approached, Abbott became less confident, and my agent more alert.

I was dragged to meeting after meeting, till I felt like a galley-slave sentenced to shout political inanities at audiences who were unable to hear them. But Sylvia was satisfied. The London papers admitted that for a comparatively unknown candidate I had fought well.

When at last the poll was declared at Westwick, and it was discovered that we had lowered Abbott's majority by nearly half, I fancied, for the moment, under the stress of the cheering and counter-cheering, that I had really done something important. Politics are full of such deceiving mirages.

"You have won your spurs, like a man," whispered Sylvia. "I knew you would."

"I couldn't get any one to take the odds against you," said Oakton grinning.

But I fell in with the rank and file of defeated candidates with resignation, and a sense of relief that it was all over.



## CHAPTER XXV

ONE never knows when a project forms itself in one's brain. Sometimes we wake up in the morning and find it established there, as though it had grown in the night like a mushroom. At other times it will burst in against our will like a torpedo through the hull of a wooden ship.

But although the genesis of an idea may always be obscure, I think the feeling that it was time I married grew insistent soon after my defeat at the election.

The man who goes forth into the world with the avowed purpose of marrying some one, simply because marriage is a human institution and he is a man, appears to me contemptible. I may be wrong. In this the practical spirit seems to me distinctly vulgar. Certainly it helps to rob the relationship of the sexes of that delicate sentiment essential to their higher dignity. I am always glad when such a fellow *faute de mieux* marries his cook, and see poetic justice in the match.

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At the same time I am aware that this transitional period of my existence, when looked back to, assumes a matter-of-fact outline very different to the frenzy with which, years before, I had attacked the same problem. Nevertheless a vague connection can be traced between these two remotely related moods.

After the worries of the election, I found Miss Hayward's society was very restful and charming, and I became solicitous that her power of refracting impressions should lead her to conclusions concerning myself in full harmony with my own vanity.

Against the dark background of bluish shade of the great cedars on the lawn, she seemed, in her white summer dresses, a very beautiful type of English early womanhood.

Sometimes as I talked with her I became conscious of a vague mental irritation in her attitude towards me, for which I could not account.

What had she heard about me? She had been an intimate friend of Lady Oakton's for some years. Who knows what confidences one woman may be tempted to make to another?

Miss Hayward watched me with something of a critical eye not entirely gratifying to my pride. The disturbance created was of the vulgar sort which yields readily to minute doses of flattery, only one cannot apply the remedy oneself.





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"I hear," said I, "that you are an acute observer."

"That is one of Lady Oakton's illusions," she answered.

Once she asked me whether I would stand for Parliament again.

"Yes," said I, "when the Kyneford division comes in sackcloth and ashes to claim my forgiveness."

She smiled (rather oddly, I thought) and observed—

"You will stand if Lady Oakton wishes it."

"I'm only the fly on Lady Oakton's chariot-wheel!"

"Well, isn't it a place of honour, Mr. Blake?"

I heard a phantom voter calling me "Lady Oakton's young man," and doubted it.

"Lady Oakton is one of my oldest friends," said I severely. "She has set her heart on winning back the seat. Generally she gets what she wants. But if the seat is ever captured it will never be by me."

The interest which a man takes in the woman he thinks beautiful defies analysis because so much of it is instinctive, and I am unable to describe the daily increasing charm which Miss Hayward had for me except by a clumsy comparison with the burnt-out passion Sylvia Carr had kindled.

All men are affected by some peculiar manifest-

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ation of physical beauty, and in spite of a hundred minute and subtle details of difference, Sylvia and Miss Hayward were both noble variants of the type which is based on regularity of feature, grace of carriage, symmetry of limb, and flawless physical health. Both had the same throat, full and round, the same proud carriage of the head, the same slender figure and deep chest. Yet the unlikeness contradicted the typical resemblance so vividly that I was a fortnight in discovering it. I made the discovery of this contradictory likeness about a fortnight after the election whilst rambling with Miss Hayward through the beautiful glades of Kyneford Park.

We had met Lady Oakton, just before lunch, on the terrace, and Miss Hayward left us together in the cool hall whose doors opened out on to the sunbright June landscape.

Sylvia looked at me fixedly.

"So you are friends, then?" she said.

But instead of answering her question I told her of my discovery, and added that there was no name for such a contradictory likeness.

"There isn't," she answered. "But I am conscious of it, though half the world can't see it. I wondered what its effect would be on you. But what other discovery have you made about her?"

"I think you exaggerated her powers as an 'impressionist.'"



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"Why? Has she formed a wrong impression about you?"

"No, not exactly. I mean that she is too critical."

"Well, isn't a criticism the result of an impression—especially in a woman? But be consoled: Evelyn Hayward is quite indifferent whether she pleases men or not."

"Is she really, Lady Oakton?"

"Yes. It is that which makes her so excellent a companion."

"For women?"

"Yes, for women, of course. But she is a wholesome corrective for man's vanity too."

"She will be a splendid tonic for a husband some day," said I satirically.

"If she ever marries," returned Sylvia, "which I very much doubt."

"Then a deplorable waste of human beauty is threatened. Miss Hayward was never intended for a vestal virgin. But forgive my curiosity: was Miss Hayward ever, ever——" Here all decent euphemisms evaded me, so out plumped "jilted"—a word of ugly import between Lady Oakton and myself.

"Jilted! No," she replied, with the faint quiver in her eyes which one detects when a woman feels but ignores an unpleasant reference. "Men never jilt women of that type."



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"The process is usually reversed," said I, pricked on to malice by her contempt.

Sylvia looked at me.

"Evelyn Hayward once rejected a man with £20,000 a year," she said after a reproachful pause.

"A woman who does that is capable of any heroism," said I.

"Fortunately she has a fortune—a small fortune—of her own, and can afford to be heroic," returned Sylvia.

And after that we went into lunch.

This slight passage of arms had left two impressions on my mind: the first was that Lady Oakton disapproved of my admiration for Miss Hayward; the second, that she was wrong when she insisted on Miss Hayward's indifference to the opinion of men.

"So Miss Hayward is determined never to marry?" I continued, half thinking aloud.

"The subject is hardly one she chooses for discussion," said Sylvia, less genially than usual; "but the rumour goes with her. It may help you to understand why she is less interested in a rising politician than he deserves."

This and several other discussions concerning Evelyn Hayward taught me that it was a subject of which Lady Oakton quickly tired.



## CHAPTER XXVI

WHAT more was I to the brilliant Sylvia than an unimportant young man, repaid for past unkindness by present patronage? To associate commonplace jealousy with her was absurd. For of whom could she be jealous? Yet to what other cause was the nameless little cloud now rising between us attributable? But who can hope to guess what is working in the brain of the woman who has conquered the world with no other weapon than her wit and beauty? Yet there are victories which provoke tyranny; and the rule of queens may be gentle until their powers of exacting allegiance are questioned.

When I returned to Town from Kyneford I was foolish enough to talk of Miss Hayward to Dorothea with unusual enthusiasm. She heard me with matronly indulgence, but had sprinkled the acid of benignant malice.

There was the suggestion of a melodramatic basis, and some astonishment at my keen interest, so suddenly awakened by a "comparative stranger."

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No one, so far as I know, has persistently accused me of "selfishness" except Dorothea; but then many brothers do seem selfish to married sisters with "young families to bring up."

When I was at Burchester, my sister wished me to improve my prospects by finding me a wife; now I fancy she desired me to remain single to improve her own. A bachelor uncle with £50,000 in his pocket should be kept as a permanent factor of comfort to a parson's wife with a rapidly increasing family.

When Lady Oakton returned to London about the end of June, bringing Miss Hayward with her, she began to cultivate Dorothea's acquaintance, greatly to the satisfaction of the Canon and his wife, and I soon discovered that I was a not unfrequent subject of their conversation. Apparently in this case Dorothea laid aside the discretion which usually strictly limited her confidences.

One bright afternoon early in July I called at Portman Square and found Dorothea there. Sylvia and she had been talking, whilst Miss Hayward, seated a little apart, had apparently listened. The look of half-contemptuous pity with which she met me convinced me that I was the victim of sisterly criticism.

In the domestic circle the Frampton-Joneses were accustomed to talk of me as a sort of spoilt child of fortune, and the lost election which restored me



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to complete obscurity no doubt gave Dorothea an excellent chance.

"I wonder," said I, following the trail suggested by Miss Hayward's glance, "why I should feel like a criminal before his judges. But I really couldn't help losing the election—could I, Lady Oakton?"

"No; you did your best, Mr. Blake."

"But how did you know we were talking of you?" said Dorothea, with the arch air of one enjoying herself in "smart" society.

"It may have been a gentle gift of divination; perhaps I fancied Miss Hayward glanced at me 'more in sorrow than in anger.'"

"There is a simpler explanation," said Miss Hayward. "I looked round because the door opened."

"Well, we were speaking of you," admitted Dorothea, filling up the pause with her matter-of-fact voice. "Lady Oakton was just agreeing with me that it was a pity you hadn't a profession."

"But I thought you had made a politician of me, Lady Oakton?"

"That, unluckily, proved merely a temporary occupation, Mr. Blake."

"A sort of odd job? Of course. I forgot."

Miss Hayward's face showed not the slightest shade of amusement or interest, and I felt faintly annoyed.

"I have just been asking myself a very grim

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question," I went on, angling among the ideas floating in my mind on the chance of finding one to stir her indifference, "a question most men and all women ask themselves at least once in their lives."

"'All women' sounds rather fascinating," said Sylvia, perceiving my effort to draw Miss Hayward into the circle of interest.

"And 'most men' a little conceited," said Dorothea, with a laugh bordering on the region of sprightliness.

"Your pastime," said Miss Hayward, looking at me more curiously, "is rather like bowing to one's self in a looking-glass. But what is this magic question?"

"It is, 'What will become of me?'"

"Is that all?" exclaimed Sylvia. "Why, I wonder what will become of me every morning before I am properly awake!"

"But you have answered the question, Lady Oakton. You have crossed the mountains of doubt and reached the promised land. So has my sister. If you knew my charming nephews as well as I do, you would agree with me. But I have arrived nowhere. I am waiting, but nothing happens. I wan't to be 'captain of my fate.'"

"'Captain of your fate,' indeed!" exclaimed Dorothea, suspecting me of "talking nonsense." "Why, he is the luckiest man in England, Miss Hayward, and one of the idlest."





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"A sort of Mascotte," said Miss Hayward.

"No; for he keeps all the luck for himself."

"It is true," said I, "that an accident rescued me from dreary seas of drudgery where I might still be floundering if I had my deserts; yet all the same I cannot recall a single moment of complete contentment in my life."

"Whose fault is that?" asked Lady Oakton.

"It must be a question of temperament, as the French say whenever they want to excuse an eccentricity," said Miss Hayward.

Her shot tempted me to fire back.

"But even if there were no dogmas in religion or dark places in nature to frighten you, Miss Hayward," I said, "would you be satisfied with life?"

"Decline to answer, Evelyn. You are not in a witness-box," said Sylvia, reading me like a book.

"I will answer 'yes' to humour Mr. Blake," she replied.

"But how can man or woman be content with existence so long as the collected experience of to-day destroys the illusions of yesterday, and darkens the prospect of to-morrow?"

"Nonsense!" cried Lady Oakton. "Every one can be happy enough until he wants to pull up his own roots to see how he is growing."

This cut short a conversation which had totally

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failed in its object. Shortly afterwards Dorothea drove off in one of the Coupé Company's carriages to fetch her husband from the Athenæum, and Miss Hayward left to play a sonata of Beethoven in the next room.

"Have I driven her away with my philosophy?" I asked.

"It's quite possible," said Sylvia. "But what did you do it for?"

"I was blowing off steam. When I came I guessed my sister had been depreciating me for your amusement and Miss Hayward's——"

"Evelyn wasn't in the least amused."

"How unnatural of her! And I wanted to bore you both for a punishment."

"Well, you succeeded. But never mind that, Mr. Blake. I want your advice."

And suddenly we found ourselves confronting each other with serious faces.



## CHAPTER XXVII

"I WANT to talk to you about Lord Oakton," said Sylvia.

And I saw she had become suddenly thoughtful. There were many rumours current. No doubt some of them reached his wife's ears with much the same colour as they reached mine. But Lord Oakton followed his inclinations with a rough sort of common-sense which was not ineffectual, and, if occasionally his amusements created a scandal, there was no rocket-firing from the housetop, or in fact anything which a woman of the world with a strong liking for liberty herself might not conveniently overlook.

What it pleased Lady Oakton to regard as "their dissimilarity in taste" enabled them to live in different parts of England for months without creating any visible domestic anxiety at home, or undue gossip abroad.

"Nothing serious, I hope," said I, adjusting myself to her expression.

"It is about—well—finance."

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"But I don't know anything about money matters, Lady Oakton."

"But you might find if there's truth in a rumour. You know Lord Oakton is mixed up in several of Mr. Brookes' schemes.

"So are most other amateur financiers."

"Yes ; but not as directors."

"No ; there isn't room for them all."

A branch of the Duchess of Belaster's family had thrust roots into the soil of high finance, and, flourishing there, had learnt to protect the tribe against storms in the money market. This I guessed was the source of a wind which, breathing suspicion on the "Blue Crag Mining Company," of which Oakton was director and Brookes the financial engineer, had made Sylvia uneasy.

"But Oakton keeps his eyes open," said I reassuringly, "and he's very shrewd."

"Yes ; but his shrewdness is of the over-confident sort."

This was true. It was first cousin to the book-maker's cunning.

"But there are always rumours about mining companies," said I, making a shambling defence to lead to greater explicitness.

"This one," said Lady Oakton, "comes from a most reliable source, which I'm not at liberty to disclose. But Lord Oakton insists it has been set in motion to depreciate the value of the shares, and



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points to it to account for their falling 'one-eighth' yesterday. But I'm convinced this time three months the directors will find themselves 'in a pretty tight place.'

Here I heard the voice of the nameless informant.

"You have seen the writing on the wall, but Lord Oakton won't believe in it," said I.

"Exactly," said Sylvia, "and I want you to find out how much truth there is in it."

"But how?" I asked rather feebly.

"Your friend Mr. Eversley is a friend of Mr. Brookes. Couldn't you sound him? They say Mr. Brookes never 'lets in' his own friends."

Here again spoke the voice of Lombard Street.

Just then the "Blue Crag" enjoyed a passing reputation for "soundness" among sanguine dabblers in the mining markets. Lord Oakton's confidence was not altogether unreasonable.

"I will learn what I can," said I. "But Lord Oakton's very determined."

"Yes; but he has quite his share of the instinct of self-preservation."

I saw Eversley on the following evening. Of late a few of the crumbs which fall from the table of the financial giant had dropped in his direction. He had prospered, his talk was of "Bulls" and "Bears" and "booms" and "slumps." He had "netted five thousand over one little deal," and

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already had "his eye on a moor in Scotland for next season." The same self-complacency shone in his face which you may see in the eyes of the man who has won fifty pounds at Monte Carlo—a look which says, "it's absurd to be poor when money may be picked up like this."

It is a point of honour among Old Burcastrians never to "do" one another, and so it pleased Eversley to regard my little excursion into territory which he believed he had thoroughly explored, with the same eye of encouragement as that with which a kind nurse watches the feeble efforts of an infant to mount a flight of stairs.

I told him that I contemplated a "little flutter" in the mining market, and that I had come to him for advice; he suggested that there was no more enlightened centre.

I had heard that "Blue Craggs" were likely to be "on the rise" soon, and had been strongly urged to buy. Eversley looked knowing, and said he supposed Lord Oakton had "put me on." Blue Craggs might be all right enough, but before buying he'd consult his friend, Solly Brookes. There were better things going than "Blue Craggs," and in my place he shouldn't be "keen on them." The only way to deal with mining shares was to buy at the bottom and sell at the top. And Eversley looked like one who had discovered the principle of this simple operation. To make sure



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of Brookes he said he would pretend the "deal" was for his own sister. "For," he added, "whatever people may say about him, Solly Brookes has never let in a pal yet."

Eversley had another protection against "the slings and arrows" of the mining market in his confidential clerk Joel, who was "own brother," he said, to a young man employed in Mr. Brookes' office. Whenever there was "a really good thing going" Eversley assured me that he heard of it through this "tipster," whose reward was a handsome percentage on the profit.

Having set this simple machinery in motion, I sat down to await the result.

Two days later Eversley and I met at the club as arranged.

"Sollie tells me," said he, "that 'Blue Craggs' are right enough, or he wouldn't touch them, but that if I wanted a really good thing for my sister, I should buy 'Priam Bicycles.' The one-pound shares are going at ten and six, but I may take his word for it that by this time next month they'll be quoted at 27 bob."

But I insisted on being "keen on 'Blue Craggs.'"

"Listen to me, Blake," said Eversley. "I'll give you a tip if you'll keep it to yourself. I've a shrewd notion Brookes means to slip out of 'em. Joel tells me he is getting rid of 'em slowly."

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Don't you touch them! When he's clear of it, there'll be a deuce of 'a slump' in that market."

I carried back this information to Sylvia. It dove-tailed neatly with rumours floating in the elevated regions where chance has been almost eliminated from the financial dealings of the demi-gods of finance.

Sylvia's eyes flashed.

"Tell Lord Oakton," she said. "He has confidence in your sense."

"No," said I incredulously.

"But he has," she insisted. "He thinks no one can play his cards better."

Did this ambiguous utterance convey the same idea to Lady Oakton's mind as to mine?

Oakton was in the library, smoking a pipe over the columns of the *Investor's Friend*.

"Mr. Blake perfectly agrees with me about the 'Blue Craggs,'" said Sylvia.

Then I told him what Eversley had said, omitting his name.

"Because Brookes knows 'warmer corners' than 'Blue Craggs,'" said Oakton, "it doesn't follow they ain't sound."

"Then why is he shuffling out of them on the sly, and as fast as he dare?" I asked.

"How d' you know he is?"

"Something a good deal stronger than instinct told me so."





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"You've had the 'straight tip,' eh? Well, I'm only in the concern to the extent of my director's shares, and what with the fees I've been paid, I don't stand to lose much."

"But when the thing comes tumbling round the shareholders' ears, won't the directors have a pleasant time! I should like to know the sort of things you have been signing. I remember when the last crack 'came,' the shareholders wanted to lynch the directors of the Mid-reef Cactus Group. There was talk about a criminal action. But the poor directors were innocent enough. How could they help signing reports which they couldn't understand? You are in just the same fix over the 'Blue Craggs.' Is there a mine at all?"

"There's a mine, right enough."

"A hole in the ground somewhere, but what's in it?"

"The 'widow's mite' and the orphan's fortune," said Sylvia pathetically.

"Rot!" exclaimed Oakton crossly, but shaken under the attack.

"And just fancy what a humiliation it would be to be done by a little Jew like Brookes!" said I, finding another form of attack. "I hate to see the Oakton name stuck to such a dismal enterprise."

And so between us we goaded him, but without extracting a promise. But Oakton's turf associa-



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tions had much increased a caution which, outside the peerage, is sometimes described as slyness. He kept an eye on what was brewing, and scenting Brookes' vanishing trick, forestalled it by a dexterous retirement from the directorate on the plea of ill-health, and a few days later General Sir Michael Smithers, C.B., succeeded him on the board. The result of this operation was that the shares went up "a point."

Sylvia, who had feared to see a title which little Cecil was to bear splashed all over with mud from the Stock Exchange, was good enough to attribute Lord Oakton's rescue to my exertions, and when, a few weeks later, "Blue Crag" began to tumble down with a lot of other inflated rubbish, she thanked me with a warmth out of proportion to the service.

"I can't be sufficiently grateful," said she, whilst my hand received an affectionate pressure from her finger-tips, which a few years earlier would have set all my pulses tingling.

But why on earth should she be so grateful? since gratitude was a quality which she possessed in no immoderate degree.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

WHILST there is nothing absurd in human passion which is sincere, natural, and instinctive, yet the phrases and metaphors used to describe it are all painted. When Shelley wrote his *Epipsychidion*, he rightly feared that the sentiment inspiring the poem would be associated in the mind of the reader of contemporary literature with the philanderings of the housemaid and the butcher-boy. To describe the subtler emotions in cold-blooded phraseology is to drag them down to the level of the shop-parlour where they expire. Thus we learn reticence from experience. When these stirrings repeat themselves, the heart which we imagine as a convenient arena for their play, holds a cynical observer. Where formerly was innocent wonder and delight, we now trace longing and misgiving. This time love is a word we hesitate to accept as a record of a feeling which we have felt before. Like the shepherd in Virgil, we know he is an inhabitant of the rocks.

A moment came when I too felt that I was



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stumbling on stony ground, and that Evelyn Hayward was leading me there.

Miss Hayward had a story which can be told in a few words. About four years before I met her she had been engaged to an officer in a Hussar regiment who was killed in a polo match in India.

My sister, Mrs. Frampton-Jones, unearthed the tragedy for me ; Lady Oakton confirmed it, but admitted Miss Hayward had never referred to a catastrophe which Dorothea insisted must prevent "every woman of tender feeling from contemplating another marriage."

But she was fond of regarding life for other people from the purely sentimental point of view. There was in Miss Hayward's demeanour nothing to suggest that she was the victim of an inconsolable sorrow, and I dismissed my sister's view as a school-girlish judgment of life.

But the excessive devotion of a beautiful woman to a dead lover is never pleasing to the men who chance to admire her. It seems out of proportion to the value of the lost object, as well as a secret kind of disparagement of their own worth. Nor is the end of the nineteenth century, when governments are suppressing monastic orders in the most Catholic countries, a fitting place for vows of any kind—even silent ones. There is a healthy side to our materialism. Two thousand years' human experience, as modified by Christianity, has taught



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us to make the best of what chance may take from us as well as of what chance may bring.

It was Miss Cartrew, Miss Hayward's aunt, who put the death of the unlucky young polo-player in the right light.

Once in a moment of confidence she said to me : "There never has been, and there never will be born into this world a young gentleman with a taste for sport, destined to break his neck, worth a life's sorrow."

Miss Cartrew only said brutal things when they were true, consequently she was, perhaps, the most unpopular lady I have ever known, and although I could not share Lady Oakton's aversion to her, I could understand it. Now Miss Cartrew was a very practical person, who cultivated common-sense to the point of bigotry. "The truth, and nothing but the truth, and no rubbish and nonsense," fairly defines this remarkable lady's attitude towards a world in which she had made some mark. Miss Cartrew was a courageous traveller and a skilful botanist, who had scoured Europe and Asia. Her book on the Caucasus has added much to the popular knowledge of that interesting region. She was the only woman I ever met who sincerely regretted her sex. Five feet nine, and of a build which may, without exaggeration, be described as athletic, her honest, homely face seemed made for braving the elements. Half an hour of her society

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made it plain why she was a spinster. Imagine a woman with short hair, no nerves, no falterings, no doubts, no headaches, resolute, acute, masculine, and of incisive speech, and you will have a fairly accurate picture of Evelyn's aunt.

Only her own circle knew that *Travels in Caucasus*, by "Vaccuus Viator," was the work of a woman. The book did not contain a single feminine phrase, whilst if further proof of manhood were needed, the exciting scene in which she drew her revolver and threatened to shoot a mutinous manservant, amply afforded it.

As Lady Oakton said : " With such a woman for an aunt and guardian, a girl might be anything."

It was Miss Cartrew's theory that the only real road to wisdom is reached by the path of personal experience, and so she spared her niece advice. Miss Hayward was of age, and mistress of her own small fortune, and her aunt exerted no visible influence over her. Even their friends and acquaintances were found in different sets.

Like all persons of strong and original characters, Miss Cartrew, of course, had prejudices, but the only one directly concerning me was an antipathy to Lady Oakton.

" She positively loathes me," said Sylvia, one day rather plaintively; " I wonder why?"

Not to be liked and flattered, was an unpleasant experience for Lady Oakton.



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"Don't you see," I answered consolingly, "that you spring from the remotest poles of your sex? You might dance in a ring with Diana and the nymphs. Miss Cartrew wouldn't be out of place banging an anvil in Vulcan's smithy."

"That's an honest trade, at all events," said Sylvia, "however unpicturesque for a woman."

But Miss Cartrew, who usually disregarded the existence of all men save the serious toilers "who had done something" in fields of activity allied to her own, for some obscure reason did not dislike me. In fact, she treated me as a man of intelligence, and her equal. Whether my interest in her niece caused her to make this exception in my favour, or whether a conviction that I misunderstood her character less than most of her acquaintances, prompted it, I do not know. Certainly she deigned to discuss problems with me that she ignored with others. For instance, once she told me that women were of two kinds, those who ought to be married, and those who ought not. This crude classification left me uninterested, until she placed her niece in the former list.

Why on earth should she tell me this? A few days later she permitted me to discover that she was planning another excursion into regions far beyond those of ordinary travel, and that her niece, who had no share in her geographical ambitions, was an obstruction to their realization. I was



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fool enough to report the conversation to Lady Oakton.

"Can't you see the woman was spurring you on to propose to her niece?" she said.

"What a preposterous notion!" said I, growing uncomfortably red.

"Preposterous?" she exclaimed, fixing me with a suspicious eye. "It's indecent. I suppose every man who goes to see her gets a similar hint. Why didn't you tell her to go orchid-hunting in Borneo and leave Evelyn alone?"

"Perhaps because I am a little afraid of her," I answered meekly.

In reality I was more afraid of Sylvia.

But was "Lady Oakton's young man" to be allowed no mind of his own?

From that day the idea that Miss Cartrew would welcome me as her niece's suitor began to shine with a solacing lustre, and even compensated slightly for Evelyn's glance of almost stunted indifference.





## CHAPTER XXIX

A MAN may walk up a dark staircase a hundred times without slipping, yet at the hundred and first essay he may fall awkwardly.

Of course I have Lord Oakton in my mind, who frequently groped his way up ugly, social backstairs, moving, however, with so bold a step that unsuspecting people fancied his business was virtuous.

One hardly expects that a man cunning in the way of the world will walk into a commonplace trap. Oakton, however, was liable to fits of Berserker rage in moments of imperfect sobriety, although, as his own man said in extenuation, "His lordship could afford to be peculiar."

Now there chanced to be in Oakton's *entourage* a rascally trainer, who had a beautiful but equally unprincipled helpmate. These two worked in couples, just as you may see a pair of hawks beating the low bushes for their common quarry.

As a pseudonymous artiste the lady had been heard of on the provincial stage as Miss Kate



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Estorel—in social circles she was understood to be the wife of Mr. Joe Bilter, who once had trained race-horses for a gentleman, whom a brief turf-career brought into collision with a jockey-club.

For some time past I had heard Oakton's name coupled with Miss Estorel's, but when a man does exactly what he likes, and with a perfectly natural air, his friends allow him latitude so long as his domestic circle remains outwardly untroubled. Every other Oakton, moreover, was a model of what a husband ought not to be, and there were numerous atavistic excuses for any line of conduct which it might please him to adopt.

Mrs. Bilter dwelt in a stuccoed edifice in well-pillared "South Belgravia," and it was here that the unpleasantness arose which required the assistance of the police, the attention of a hospital surgeon, and found a sequel in the Police Court.

The story is a little obscure, and has variants. I give the simplest.

One evening Lord Oakton accepted Mrs. Bilter's invitation to sup. Mr. Joe Bilter and a friend were also of the party, which appears to have been ill-assorted, for the host, if Lord Oakton's version of the incident be accepted, proposed to borrow money from his wife's guest under a threat. These business proceedings, to which the police report gave a harsher name, had an unfortunate effect on



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Oakton's temper. They had, he said afterwards in extenuation, given him poisonous whisky, but he admitted "he didn't remember what he hit Bilter with." But the witnesses agreed that the weapon was a bottle, whilst a surgeon testified that the cut was deep, and might have been dangerous.

Bilter fell, blood flowed, the lady shrieked, the servant opened the street-door and the police entered, and removed Oakton to the police-station, where he remained until the butler from Portman Square bailed him out.

The case came before the magistrate, and although Mr. Bilter (who, it was rumoured, had received adequate compensation) insisted that the broil was of his provoking, and even went so far as to suggest that he had "only got what he deserved," yet the public appetite for scandal was whetted, and a "Lord and a Lady" "Fracas in Pimlico" flashed forth as most attractive head-lines on the posters of the evening papers.

But if the story ended at this unsatisfactory point so far as the newspaper readers were concerned, it had a less indefinite sequel at Kyneford and Portman Square, and induced Sylvia to send for me.

Just before the "Oakton scandal" Miss Cartrew with her niece had left her temporary residence in London, for Sussex, where she owned some

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picturesque but depreciated acres, and Duncombe Grange, a charming old gabled house in a noble beech-wood at the foot of the South Downs.

The day I received Lady Oakton's summons was unluckily the date fixed for my visit to Miss Cartrew. So I postponed it.

Lady Oakton had been sometimes accustomed to speak, with an air of genial pity, of her husband's "Bohemian tastes," yet I doubt whether Mr. Bilter extended her knowledge of the nature of his amusements. The incident, however, had enlightened the world, and I could understand that it had caused her the acutest humiliation she had suffered since her position in society had been won.

It required no effort of the imagination to picture the Duchess of Belaster shaking her head, or to hear Mrs. Apsley-Page, who still remembered she had once been Oakton's step-mamma, maliciously sympathizing over "these most deplorable disclosures."

But did ever a husband make a fool of himself without subjecting his wife to the embarrassing commiseration of all her own relations, and most of her familiar friends?

For that which does not exist, and for that which is not seen, as every school-boy knows, the rule is the same.

I remember old Lord Oakton once saying to my



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father, in reference to a somewhat similar incident, that so long as the newspapers leave him alone, a peer can do pretty much as he likes, but the moment the middle-classes get on his track he is "no better than one of the wicked."

Sylvia knew this quite as well as her late father-in-law.

As I drove through the hot streets to Portman Square in a hansom with a white awning, I felt, as a counsellor, conscious chiefly of my incompetence. Logically the domestic situation of the Oaktons was unchanged by "the revelation." The only difference was that the public had been admitted to a brief glimpse. They would draw their own conclusions, but what did that matter? Sylvia might still pose as a charming and exceedingly "smart" martyr. No blame attached to her because she consented to endure, for the sake of an honourable name, a position only considered unbearable among the less exalted classes.

It was the afternoon of one of those sultry days of which an English summer brings a few, when the papers chronicle sun-strokes, and you long for the splash of fountains to soothe the turbid roar of the traffic. The rush and swing of Metropolitan existence had raised a faint, golden haze over the parched city, and the Oaktons' side of the Square was blinking somnolently behind sun-blinds.

When I had entered the fragrant gloom of the



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flower-scented house, and the door had closed on the glare of the pavement, something seemed to be stirring behind the deceiving calm.

But the thing had to be faced, so I summoned my best man-of-the-world attitude to confront it.

Sylvia's room was a luxurious and well-ordered feminine nest, hung with charming water-colour drawings of pastoral subjects, and soothed with silken draperies. I found her sitting with her back to the shaded windows, in a loose white dress, and with a troubled look in her clear eyes. The room seemed ill-suited to any comedy containing a tragic element.

"Every one else who has the faintest excuse," she commenced, "has already called to commiserate with me. But I had to send for you."

Her reproach plunged me into the commonplace, and I mumbled something vaguely consolatory, to the effect that "we all knew Lord Oakton's Bohemian habits, and that no sensible person attached importance to them."

"Please don't fling my own euphemism back at me, Mr. Blake," she answered petulantly; "I want you to tell me what to do."

"Do? Why, nothing. Everything is just as it was before."

"The same to men at their clubs, perhaps, but very different to me. No one detests a vulgar fuss more than I, but I'm sick of keeping my sense of

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personal justice in a straight waistcoat, whilst the whole world stands round me in a circle roaring with laughter."

"That's a morbid illusion, Lady Oakton. No one is laughing. There are only two ways of taking this. As a woman of the world, or the reverse."

"As an outraged British matron?" she suggested cynically.

"Yes, if the jocular view comforts you."

"Not at my own expense. But isn't there a third way, Mr. Blake? Once you believed in the equality of the sexes."

Sylvia's beautiful voice suddenly softened. It took me back to the Kolver-side, to the cool hazel copses, and my hundred vows; it told me she remembered them all, and, perhaps, still counted on their permanence. I felt myself avoiding her eyes, whilst an odd, clumsy timidity cut my speech.

"When you married Cecil Oakton," I said, "you scarcely expected a Darby and Joan existence. You found nearly all you wanted. All marriages are founded on the give-and-take principle."

A thread of excitement seemed stretched across the room. Sylvia looked at me and said—

"You were not so worldly once. You know there is another side."

"If there is, neither Lady Oakton's pride nor duty can look at it."

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"Pride!" she exclaimed. "That's dead; and what it pleases you to call duty is only a sort of convention. I think I understand now how the Lady of Shalot felt when the mirror cracked."

"She was a poor spell-bound wretch," I answered. "You choose to be a brilliant woman of the world."

"Well, I am tired of being a woman of the world."

"A little, perhaps, for the moment. But will you be to-morrow?"

But now I was to discover why Sylvia was displeased with me. Suddenly her manner changed.

"I am afraid my telegram has upset your arrangements. You were leaving town, I think?"

"I had arranged to stay with Miss Cartrew at Duncombe," I said, in a matter-of-fact voice.

"What an odd person to stay with!"

"London is very hot," I observed meekly.

"Scarcely hot enough for that. She is a horrid woman, and hates me."

We sat for a few moments in a silence under which a sense of mutual disapproval made itself felt, each following a train of thought hidden from the other. At last Sylvia, with a gesture of impatience, spoke.

"I wonder what evil things you are thinking of me?"





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"I was trying to forget something."

"What?"

"Forgive my brutality. Your threat of retaliation."

"Against you?"

The answer showed the divergence of our thoughts.

"No, no. I wasn't thinking of myself, but of Lord Oakton."

"He has offended me deeply. I am tired of making sacrifices."

"But isn't the whole question one of worldly common-sense? You are a beautiful, popular, successful, and much-admired woman, with almost everything to make life delightful. But because your one trial has, for the moment, become more acute you threaten to alter the whole attitude of your life. I can't help putting it brutally. It is too late to change your policy towards Lord Oakton. There is no other. I am convinced you must understand this better than I do."

"I wish your logic were less cold-blooded. There are moments when a woman feels ready to exchange all she possesses for the one thing she misses most."

The conversation had leapt over all our ordinary barriers. The air seemed stirring with suppressed excitement. If a snake had thrust a scaly head from the silken hangings of her room, and hissed



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something wicked, the sinister effect would scarcely have been deeper.

"Few of us get what we miss most," said I, following the idea recklessly in all its issues of personal application, "especially after missing it once."

Then she looked at me strangely and said—

"You are thinking of yourself."

"A little, perhaps."

"But we all know you are a philosopher."

"If I am, Lady Oakton, you made me one."

"Is this my punishment for it, then?"

"I don't understand."

"Do you deluge me with common-sense because you have never forgiven me?"

"Forgiven you! But you have always been my kindest friend."

"Always?"

"Yes, always. It is true I didn't know it once. I mean when I was a ridiculous boy, and you gave me the lesson I needed. But I was an honest young fool, and took my punishment healthily."

"I think," she said, softly—it seemed to me affectionately—"that I liked you better when you were a brave, romantic boy, than I do to-day in your cold mantle of common-sense. Do you remember the Kever, and the pine-woods on the ridge? What a precocious boy you were!"

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"Precocious? I ought to have been whipped. I have forgotten nothing."

And as I spoke I heard little Cecil's step on the stairs.

"I want to see him," I said. Then I opened the door and the pretty lad ran in, with pleasure dancing in his clear, blue eyes. His presence cleared the air. Cecil had repaid my efforts to win his friendship with generous interest. Ever since I had taken him without his governess to the Zoological Gardens, he had admitted me to terms of equality, graciously bestowing the charming gift of his confidence. His voice was sweet and clear, his words clean-cut—another heritage from his mother,—and when he laughed, he looked the ideal of limpid and winning childish beauty, such as Andrea del Sarto often painted. The Oakton blood was invisible in him, except faintly in the firm and resolute moulding of the chin. His light foot and laughter, his swift boyish carriage, came from his mother, who adored him.

The boy's coming half-startled her.

"Where have you been, Cecil?" she asked.

"Oh, we drove through the Regent's Park out to Hampstead. And, I say, Mr. Blake, we heard the lions."

"No. What did they say?"

"Roared, of course. They always do, you know,"

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in hot weather. When will you take me to see them fed again?"

"When I come back, Cecil. If you are in Town, and your mother will let me."

"She'll let you, of course."

"Mr. Blake is going to stay with Miss Cartrew," said Sylvia, glancing at me over the fair head of the child, as he stood between us in his spotless white clothes.

"Who's Miss Cartrew?" asked Cecil.

"Miss Hayward's aunt," I explained.

"Oh, Evelyn Hayward, you mean? I like her. She's pretty, like mother is, and comes into my nurse—I mean school-room—and tells me nice stories."

"Miss Cartrew and Evelyn cannot talk of me without quarrelling," said Lady Oakton to me. "I am their Armenian question. I wonder how your presence will affect the situation?"

"Leave it unchanged. Every one knows I am only a poor knight, serving in your ladyship's train."

Then Cecil, who had listened attentively, looked up suddenly, and asked—

"Is that why they call you 'Lady Oakton's young man'?"

I answered as mildly as I could.

"I think it must be because I am a very old friend of yours, Cecil."



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"The oldest, Cecil, and the best," said his mother.

Then, after a pause, she added—

"And *still* the most faithful."

And I read the signal in the adverb.

"The next time they call you 'Lady Oakton's young man,' Mr. Blake, I shall know what to tell them," said the boy with the air of one whose doubts are dispelled. Then turning to his mother, he said—

"Please, mother, let me have tea here with you."

"Let him stay," said I, "for I must go."

So Cecil stayed.

"How can you dream of revolt when you look at that boy?" I said in a low voice.

"The dear fellow does quell mutiny," she replied.

"Good-bye, Cecil," I said to the boy.

"Good-bye, Mr. Blake. Remember about the lions. I shan't forget about 'Lady Oakton's young man'."

The boy laughed after me, but I carried the flavour of the label I hated into the street with a number of other mixed emotions.

## CHAPTER XXX

IF my conversation with Sylvia left me bewildered, the evening of the same day still further added to my perplexity.

The change in her was explicable only on the assumption that the pent-up mischief of the last eight years had been let loose at once.

At half-past ten, whilst I was sitting in my rooms alone, Lord Oakton walked in.

His face was moist ; his stiff collar had faltered and bent under the burden of the hot hour. The hereditary gout had not yet gripped him, and he was in the jovial after-dinner mood, which in his case was easily spurred by more libations into that heavy sullenness which renders a man an undesirable companion.

Perhaps if his wife had shown greater sympathy for these fits of vinous beatitude she might have kept him within the decent area of domesticity, and so have saved herself from the condemnation of those austere critics of her own sex who are persuaded that since all husbands' habits can be



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moulded by their wives, consequently in the end a woman gets exactly the spouse she deserves.

Oakton glanced round the room till his eye stopped on the photograph of his wife and child which stood over the bookcase under the light of an electric lamp.

"Rather like 'em, isn't it?" he observed.

"Excellent. Lady Oakton sent it to me for a Christmas card."

"Cecil's a grand little chap," he continued, studying his son. "He tells me you're a great pal of his."

Then he sat down in the arm-chair opposite to me and lit one of my cigars, whilst I rang for the whisky-and-seltzer, always the first consequence of his visits.

"There's something I want to say, Blake," said he, as soon as the servant had left us, and the ice was clinking refreshingly in our tumblers.

His visit, whatever its object, was evidently friendly.

"Nothing wrong, I hope," said I, trying to read his face.

"Not much. You saw Lady Oakton to-day."

"Yes."

"And told her not to make a fool of herself about this Bilter business."

"I told her that it oughtn't to make any difference between you."

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"That's a nicer way of putting it, but it amounts to the same thing. I must tell you she 'went' for me a bit after dinner, said I had 'disgraced myself and made her ridiculous.' Now I'm not at all proud of 'the show,' but she ought to have 'let me down' easily."

Oakton expected me to concur, so I said nothing.

"There's always been," he continued, "a sort of understanding."

"A tacit understanding?" I interrupted, spurred by curiosity.

"Well, we didn't call in the lawyer and have it set down in black and white, if you mean that. But it was an understood thing, I say, that so long as I did nothing derog—derogat'ry—got it out that time—I was to have what rope I wanted. The fact is, she wants a nice clean title for the youngster."

"Naturally," said I.

"But what with my dealings 'with low Jew stock-jobbers' and 'disreputable betting-men and their wives'—that's what she calls 'em—she's afraid he won't have it. Now that isn't a fair way of getting at a fellow. I'm fond of the boy, and it's simple rot to pretend a rubbishy row with a blackmailing blackguard can affect him. 'Leave him out,' said I, 'he need never know of it.' 'Some day it may be my duty to tell him,' she said. Then I told her duty of that kind was only another name for spite.



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Rather a nasty one that, for in revenge she told me what my ex-mamma-in-law had said, and how the old Duchess of Belaster had shaken her wig over my 'depravity.' But I told her old women didn't count, and to ask a man. 'A man indeed,' she said, 'they're all the same.' 'Ask your friend Blake,' said I. Then she told me she had, and how you tried to make her see there was one law for a woman and another for a man, which of course there is. We said a good deal besides which doesn't matter, and she grew surprisingly warm, which made me keep cool, for as a rule she's pretty indifferent about things. The result of the wrangle is that I discovered you had offended her."

"What I?" I exclaimed. "Impossible."

Then I looked at Oakton closely, wondering how much less sober he was than he seemed.

The cunning look that had stolen into his eyes increased my own curiosity.

"A man can offend a woman in more ways than he knows how," he observed.

"I dare say. But how can I have offended Lady Oakton?"

"It's rather a delicate business, Blake."

"But I'm one of Lady Oakton's oldest friends."

"I should think you were. Don't they call you 'Lady Oakton's young man'?" he answered with a jovially cynical grin. "Don't look savage. There's nothing derog—de—rog—a—tory—I'm

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nuts on the word to-night, Blake, it's one I picked up from your father—in being pally with my wife."

But still my curiosity was stronger than my annoyance.

"Tell me how I have offended Lady Oakton," I urged.

"I see a good many more things than some of you fellows think, Blake," he said sapiently.

"I always knew you did."

"You were right. But give me another whisky, not so much seltzer this time. That'll do nicely."

Oakton tasted his drink generously, and resumed—

"Human nature's an odd thing, Blake, as I dare say you know."

"I've always suspected it. But what has that to do with Lady Oakton being offended with me?"

"Oh, a good deal; for Lady Oakton suffers from human nature like the rest of us. Not so badly as I do, perhaps, but still a bit. She seems to have got it into her head that she has treated you badly. Whether she did or no you know best. That's why she wanted to stuff you into Parliament. Well, now she has a notion that you want to marry Evelyn Hayward, and she don't approve of the match. Miss Hayward's a nice girl, with a fortune of her own too, and I believe she would marry you right enough if let alone. But she hasn't been.

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When Lady Oakton wants a thing not to happen she stops it. So if you propose to the girl, the odds are that you'll be 'chucked.' It doesn't matter how I've found this out, but you can take my 'tip.' I give it you, because you've always 'run straight,' and played the game fairly. That's what I wanted to tell you, Blake. I dare say I shall be sorry for it to-morrow."

Then Oakton finished his whisky, and the clock struck twelve.

This extraordinary confidence staggered me. Oakton looked at me as though he enjoyed the effect of it as visible on my face.

"But how can my marriage affect Lady Oakton?" I asked.

"I must leave you to answer that riddle," said he. "But don't imagine this is a 'confidential communication,' as they call it. You may ask Lady Oakton herself, or, for the matter of that, Miss Hayward. Lady Oakton's given me a bit of her mind to-night, so it occurred to me we might as well settle this business up 'on the square' all round."

"But did Lady Oakton know you were going to tell me this?"

"She'll never know if you keep it to yourself, which, if you are the man I take you for, you will."

"I suppose I ought to thank you for this hint, Oakton."

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"It isn't nec'ss'ry, ol' chap. I'm not used to gratitude. But I wasn't going to see an ol' frien' put upon, even by my wife. She's a good woman in her way, but she asks a little too much. But now you'll know how to take care o' yourself. I shall just look in at the Club, and then 'turn in'."

And I did not press him to stay, but walked down with him to the front-door.

The moon was shining brightly over the towers of Westminster, and a cooler air, faintly scented with leaves and grass, stirred across St. James' Park.

"It's a rum world, ain't it, Blake?" said Oakton, standing on the threshold. "Hi there!" he cried to a belated hansom which had put down a fare lower down the street.

The cab drove up; Oakton lurched in.

"Goo' ni', Blake, goo' ni' . . . ight. I feel like a man who has done a noble deed. Off you go, cabby. Boot and Spur Club."



## CHAPTER XXXI

I LAY awake the greater part of the night in consequence of Lord Oakton's astounding confidence, if confidence be the right word to describe a communication which I doubted. The more I thought of it the uglier it seemed. What he had told me amounted to this. Lady Oakton, suspecting that I was on the point of asking Miss Hayward to marry me, had told her something obviously to my disadvantage to make her reject me. This seemed too mean to be believed.

Yet I knew that Lady Oakton did not wish me to marry Miss Hayward. But between a disinclination that a thing should happen and a base manoeuvre to prevent it there lies a moral gulf.

But how could I know what confidences women might exchange? Lady Oakton, with her keen sense of the ridiculous, and in the triumphant consciousness of her beauty, might have told Miss Hayward the history of my foolish loves. She might even have shown her those half-dozen letters, conveyed to her through Sarah, and that silly doggerel of mine—

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"I saw a vision by the Kolver-side,  
My heart stopt beating—I beheld my bride,"

and all the rest of the puerile rubbish.

But then one's ten-years'-old follies, even when they are maliciously dug up, are of no account in the good-natured worldly existence where all but hypocrites regard them as a necessary absurdity in the moral growth of youth.

What more could Lady Oakton have done than laugh at me? Nothing if she were honest.

But which was the more likely, that Oakton should play the part of a mischievous devil—a part for which he had some taste—or that his wife should appear in the *rôle* of a vindictive *intrigante*? Was it not more probable that the whole ignominious structure had no worthier foundation than the malice lurking in a muddled brain?

To think of Lady Oakton with her diamonds, her stately figure, her brilliant smile, and to measure her by the squalid scale which her husband had given me, was too degrading.

But before I was many miles out of Victoria Station on my way into Sussex, I became conscious of the growth of another resolve.

The suspicion—but it was something more than a suspicion—that Lady Oakton desired to prevent a marriage between myself and Evelyn Hayward increased my determination to bring it about if I could.

Even to have outgrown the wayward reasonable-



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ness of youth is to hover in the mellow verge of middle age. I already fancied that I could feel its shadow in the decay of enthusiasm in the growth of a lethargic indifference.

I saw myself, as a mature bachelor, pottering aimlessly at clubs, an effete and wasted life. This wraith of myself chilled me. Out of window of the train lay a very different world. The shadows were sailing over the ripe corn which the glowing bands of red poppies invaded. The land seemed full of inexhaustible youth and fecundity. Not a hand-breadth of brown, bare earth was visible under the late summer's opulence; even the cold distances were warmed with the dark rounded foliage of the oaks. Nature conquered everywhere. I alone seemed outside its happy circle of teeming life.

Then I imagined tall Evelyn Hayward, in her white summer dress, moving across these brimming fields.

There was a man-servant and a dog-cart waiting for me at the station. The way to Duncombe lay by cross-roads, over a rolling country. At one time through stretches of fern and gorse, next by high hedgerows, with their riot of bramble-bushes, and finally under an avenue of ancient beeches to the old red-brick gabled house which Miss Cartrew had inherited when her brother the General died.

The woods were overrun with rabbits, the trees sheltered the amorous ringdoves; occasionally a

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jay, the sunlight flashing on his blue-feathered wings, shot screaming through the boughs. Tall purple foxgloves nodded solemnly to each other on the sloping banks, and the firs wafted ancient and musky odours across the road. The pleasant place of chequered ferny undergrowth and indolent country stirrings might some day belong to Evelyn Hayward. The gentle melancholy of the dark boughs would suit the unrestlessness which made her presence so soothing. It seemed that the woods moved with a quiet sigh of satisfaction.

On the lawn, bright with flowers, Miss Cartrew and her niece stood watching the cart as it swung round the turn in the avenue. Under the shade of a copper beech, in a soft white hat, sat a grey-bearded old gentleman reading a book. The cart drew up before the creeper-clad entrance. Miss Cartrew hoped that I had had a pleasant journey; Miss Hayward, with tranquil gaze, "thought it must have been very hot in London yesterday." Then I discovered that the other guest was Professor Donald Kaird, famed for his knowledge of comparative values in artificial manures, and learned in botany. The book which he was reading was entitled *Love's Good-bye*, and led me to infer that he was resting after more serious labours. For wisdom has strange methods of relaxing its sinews.

From my bedroom window, through the clustering roses and the dark boughs beyond, the rounded





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flanks of the Downs were visible. A cavalry sabre on the wall, an Indian god on a pedestal, and some strange brazen oriental pots spoke of General Cartrew's eastern service. But on the walls were a pretty pastel portrait of Miss Hayward as a girl of fourteen, and some water-colour sketches of the usual kind—a blue lake with a ruin, a purple and yellow mountain, and a most solid corn-field marked "E.H."

Then I sat down and reflected on the object of my visit till the luncheon-bell roused me. The frame of mind that takes minute impressions results often from nervous tension. I felt like an intruder in the quiet, low-roofed, oak-panelled drawing-room—a room of the type which smart London upholsterers endeavour but signally fail to copy.

The room had its own message. "Nothing," it said, "has been changed in me since the General died. Please don't talk too loud—this isn't a London club."

The lunch was excellent and the claret matched the solemnly genial air of the room. Evelyn Hayward concealed her suspicions of the object of my visit even if she had any.

My powers of conversation, needing perhaps the stimulus which women like Lady Oakton knew so well how to apply, dragged under the weight of my purpose. On me the part of a wooer sat awkwardly. The gay cavalier should canter up

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on his steed to the abode of the lady gracefully, light-heartedly. His wits must never fail; he twirls his moustache with the air of a conqueror. But the frolic spirit will abandon quiet modern wooers when they most need it, if they at all resemble me.

The party seemed oddly assorted. The others may have found the intervals of silence reposeful; perhaps they did not even notice them, for the Professor and Miss Cartrew were old friends, sharing extensive grounds of common interest.

Miss Hayward, I remember, interrupted the long silence under which I could hear the Professor enjoying his salad "to hope that he had found his book amusing."

Oh yes, he was quite satisfied. His daughter selected his fiction, she knew what he liked. So long as a story ended happily and bore no resemblance to real life he could read anything.

"I can't read rubbish," said Miss Cartrew. "A sentimental novel makes me sick. What do you think, Mr. Blake?"

I said I could only read what I liked, and feared my literary tastes were limited.

"But you used to write yourself once upon a time, Mr. Blake," observed Miss Hayward.

"I have been guilty once or twice, Miss Hayward."

"When and where?" asked the Professor eagerly.

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"Long ago in the *Freshman's Garland of Verse*," said I.

"I should like to read that. Have you a copy?"

No, I hadn't, and scarcely thought the Professor would find one outside the British Museum.

"I have seen a copy," said Miss Hayward.

Then I nearly exclaimed, "the deuce you have!" but checked myself and asked "where?" as indifferently as I could.

"At Kyneford. Lady Oakton showed it to me. It had a blue binding covered with daffodils."

"Did you never give similar hostages to fortune, Professor, when you were an undergraduate?" I asked.

But he could not or would not understand me, so Miss Hayward came to his rescue.

"Mr. Blake means, did you ever write poetry, too?"

"Bless me, no!" he exclaimed.

"Many clever young men do," said Miss Cartrew, throwing her weight on my side. "It is a good sign with them, although quite inexcusable in our sex."

"Like rational dress," suggested Miss Hayward. Then, probably because we remembered the rumour accusing Miss Cartrew of conquering the Caucasus in trousers, the subject dropped.

But I could find neither encouragement in the topic nor its treatment.

"I know you. Once you wrote silly love poems

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to Lady Oakton. I have seen them." That was the meaning of Evelyn Hayward's shot at me. It was a long one, but she knew the range. Lady Oakton had "written me down an ass" for her friend's amusement.

Was then the ridicule with which I had covered myself in the loves of my youth, to cling to the skirts of my mature affections to the destruction of their dignity, the depreciation of their worth?

"Here comes a man with a most foolish and battered heart on his sleeve. Lady Oakton has already nailed it up once as a despised trophy in the Temple of Vanity. I'll none of it." Was it this that Evelyn Hayward was thinking under the silences of that dismal luncheon which the Professor's blissful champings alone disturbed?

The impression that I was a poor and feeble creature must be dispelled at any cost—even if it were true. So after lunch I became the aggressor.

The Professor went to his novel again under the copper-beech; Miss Cartrew sat herself by an open window to write, and Evelyn Hayward crossed to the furthest end of the lawn where there was a rustic seat, as though she were choosing her battlefield.

I noted the movement from my bedroom window, and came down with my cigarette-case to join her. But even the drooping foliage of the willow above could not give an air of comfort to the gnarled frame of that uneasy chair.



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"Let me bring you a comfortable seat," said I.

"Pray don't trouble."

"But I want to say something to you, and feel I can't whilst you sit in that penitential chair."

"What about, Mr. Blake?"

"About myself."

"Is that all?"

"No; it's about you and Lady Oakton."

"Then I think this seat will do."

But I brought her a low garden-chair, and took the rustic seat myself and commenced the fight.

"What I want to say is difficult, Miss Hayward."

"Then why say it?"

"Because I want to get at the truth. Lady Oakton, who places you, or who used to place you, on a pedestal above her other friends, once told me—it was before I knew you—of your singular power of taking impressions. In one case this has misled you."

"Even Lady Oakton has her illusions. But my mistakes are quite harmless."

"Not when they affect your opinion of me, Miss Hayward. Now I can't help feeling that you have heard something about me which tinctures your otherwise wholesome feeling of friendly indifference."

This wasn't brilliant, not at all like the gay cavalier, with the flashing eyes and curling moustaches, but it brought us one step nearer.

"I have never discussed you with any one

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except Lady Oakton," she said, "and I understand she is your oldest friend."

"But our oldest friends often hold a mortgage on our folly, Miss Hayward. What of the book 'with the blue binding covered with daffodils'?"

"I thought the verses pretty."

"You thought the writer a feeble maudlin ass!"

"Not at all."

"There's nothing more damning—I'm speaking for myself, the victim—than a 'not at all.' But doesn't justice forgive the follies of a boy when he has paid the price of them? Forgive me for speaking bluntly, but will you tell me what Lady Oakton said about me?"

Miss Hayward hesitated, looked troubled, but finally said "No" with resolution.

"Then you must hear a confession," said I. "Once a boy and a girl lived in the same village. They were old enough to fall in love—at least he was—desperately. He was a tender youth, and he loved her so much that he was shot up into a new world which, for a little while, he mistook for a paradise. But the change soon came. The love-story, which was a radiant glory to the brain-sick youth, had a worldly and practical side to it which was so ridiculous that only the very strongest love in the world—love like the boy's—could withstand it. The youth was flung out of his fool's paradise into Hades where he expiated his folly, but the maiden married—married the Fairy Prince. But



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in time the youth recovered—" Miss Hayward made a movement of dissent—"recovered," I insisted, "and grew up to be a man ; but the story can be cut short, because I see you have heard it all before."

"But with rather a different ending."

"It is a story with no variants. My version is the only true one."

"The hero should know best, Mr. Blake."

"You recognize him then ? But there's a sequel. This—what shall I call him ?—victim of circumstance, was very deeply affected by his quite common-place experience, and for a long time thought that he should never meet in the world again another woman able to make his blood stir. He took what he thought was a philosophical view of life, and sat down to enjoy it. But one day he discovered that he was mistaken. His life seemed dreary, lonely—in fact, a mistake. For he cared for some one else—a beautiful, quiet-eyed, soft-voiced girl. Unluckily accident, or was it malice ? had given her a glance into the foolish past history of the man, and closed—perhaps poisoned—the sources of sympathy. What is to become of this man, Evelyn Hayward ?"

"Evelyn Hayward cannot help him."

"Then no one else can. Why cannot she ?"

"Must she give a reason ?"

"Yes, or the excuse she mistakes for one."

"She does not believe the boy's passion ever

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burnt itself out. It is there still, hidden, smothered and kept in bounds, but ready to burst out again under a temptation which is sure sooner or later to be exercised. There must be no mortgages—the figure is yours, Mr. Blake—on the love, or rather the shadow of it, which is offered to—me.”

And then we understood one another. She had told me, as plainly as she decently could, that she believed I still loved Lady Oakton. What else did she think then—that my wish to marry her was the result of a cold-blooded experiment to find a remedy for a hopeless and ignominious passion?

But she answered my look.

“I think that a heart, burnt and scorched in reckless service, is worse than no love at all. But let us spare one another further explanations.”

I had been jilted once. Now I was rejected. Truly I had no luck with women.

\* \* \* \* \*

As soon as I could leave Evelyn Hayward mistress of the field, I did. I was too mortified to care much for the loss of personal dignity involved in my dismissal. There was much melancholy interest in my defeat. But to imagine that Miss Hayward had rejected me to please Lady Oakton, seemed manifestly absurd. But I felt there was something stronger than a coincidence in Evelyn's refusal of my proposal with Sylvia's disapproval of the match as a parallel.



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In the library I found Miss Cartrew reading with her back to the light.

"Well!" she said. "You don't look happy!"

"I'm not," said I. "I'm an unlucky dog. You were good enough to ask me to spend a week here, but I've made the place too hot for me already, and must be off to-morrow."

"Evelyn, I suppose," she said, grasping the situation,—*"isn't it any good?"*

"Not a bit."

"The girl must be a fool!"

"It wouldn't be modest for me to agree with you."

"But what reason did she give?"

"Simply declined—without thanks."

"I *am* sorry!" exclaimed Miss Cartrew.

"Thank you. You're very kind. But please don't speak to her about it."

"Trust me. Not I! Such a well-assorted match too! I have no patience with women! Those who ought to marry remain single out of some sentimental caprice; those who oughtn't to insist on hunting out husbands for themselves. A nice old maid she'll make, without a single taste for the profession!"

I reflected that the rejection of me as a husband did not amount on her part to a vow of celibacy, but kept the thought to myself.

After a pause Miss Cartrew added—

"But surely you won't run away like this?"

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"But what is the use of staying, Miss Cartrew? Her answer was final. She rather dislikes me than otherwise."

"That's nonsense. I know better!"

"She looks on me as an ass with a past!"

"I understood that phenomenon was confined to women! I suppose she meant that business with Lady Oakton. Every one has heard of that. It was a mistake."

I was not quite certain whether Miss Cartrew referred to the period 'preceding or succeeding Sylvia's marriage, but refrained from asking.

"But Lady Oakton has been my kindest friend," said I.

She sniffed irritably at the statement.

"No doubt! But to be a fine lady's pet isn't always a recommendation. Of course I have no reason for saying so beyond a little general knowledge of human nature, but I can quite understand if this friend of yours didn't want you to marry Evelyn that she might take precautions to prevent it. Now I suppose you will go and look somewhere else for a wife."

"Not I, Miss Cartrew. I've had enough wooing for the present."

"So you think! But when a man has set his heart on marriage, he's capable of marrying the Plague or Earthquake rather than remain single. Men in your frame of mind are lucky when they marry the governess instead of the cook! Well,



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no one need ever know anything about this unfortunate business. If you ever think of asking the girl to change her mind—she doesn't deserve it—remember I'm on your side. Don't think that I want to get her off my hands, but I'm convinced she ought to be married. That other affair of hers was quite four years ago. Well, the matter's settled for the present, and we needn't say any more about it. Please ring the bell, and we'll have tea in here."

For the rest of the day Miss Cartrew took me in hand and did her best to console me. After dinner, from the lowest depths of her cellars, she summoned a bottle of priceless port stored up a generation before by her brother for his own use, and now preserved for my comfort by his untimely decease.

I cannot tell whether Evelyn observed her aunt's efforts to repair her ravages on my equanimity, but recall the vindictive glitter in Miss Cartrew's eye whenever it fell on her niece, looking cool and lovely in an evening gown of soft pale yellow silk.

The Professor, who had finished his love-story and had no suspicion of mine, helped me with the bottle. It induced him to talk of his undergraduate days and to compare them very favourably with mine.

"*Nunc vino pellite curas!*" A noble wine for a dismal occasion. In my love affairs Bacchus and Venus appear derisively consorted. When Sylvia jilted me I got drunk for the first, and, so far, for

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the last, time in my life. Surely there is an irony in my historic drinkings which should comfort the wearers of the Blue Ribbon. Here was Miss Car-trew comforting me for her niece's rejection of my proposal with a wine of magnificent vintage in perfect condition!

After dinner the Professor and I smoked together under the soft stars. The western heavens were still full of tender light, and some belated songster, which could not be the nightingale, but whose note was sweet, throbbed a song through the twilight.

What a night for luckier lovers than myself!

The Professor talked of himself, as men warmed with good wine usually do. He had grandchildren already, and was proud of them. I forget how many. But as he prated of them I wondered how old I should be before I too left patriarchal traces on the census list.

When our cigars were finished Evelyn Hayward had retired; when I left the next morning to catch an early train she had not appeared.

And this is the story of my rejection! How perfectly commonplace it seems—neither comedy nor tragedy—but just life with all the rough edges left on!

## CHAPTER XXXII

WHAT was I to do now? First of all, I must remember not to make a fool of myself. But whom should I attack? To accuse Lady Oakton of undervaluing me in the eyes of Evelyn Hayward, so that the latter found it impossible to think of me as a prospective husband, was a policy too absurd even for wounded pride and frustrated affection to entertain. Yet to sit down under a rebuff, which I felt to be due to Lady Oakton's intervention, was almost equally distasteful. When a man finds himself in a situation from which his ill-treated dignity can extract no compensations, there is a strong temptation to sulk. Of the many forms of sulking I chose, I think, the least unamiable.

England, that hot August, seemed scarcely wide enough for my concealed but vague resentment, so I joined Eversley and another old Burcastrian, the owner of a yacht, in a fishing and shooting tour in Norway. The wild man of the woods and hills, the primitive being bound to Nature by close and

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indissoluble ties of kinship, is strongly represented in most Englishmen. Civilized man can always draw upon his garnered atavisms as a remedy against the shocks of an over-elaborated social order. Self-imposed hardship, one of the best cures for fussy vanity, simplifies the processes of personal introspection, and leads them to more or less reasonable conclusions. Moreover, the overwhelming ruggedness of a land where the imagination in its flight is thrown back to the glacial period, is a far stronger tonic for a love-sick soul than the palms and cypresses of the south with their love-breathing legends. Not that my soul was love-sick! It had been so effectually scorched in early youth by Sylvia that its present discomforts were on a far more endurable scale. The sufferer was capable of mocking his own pangs which never interfered with his appetite.

He had been, he told himself, an exceedingly fortunate man in everything but love. Only the fool expects too much! He had had his lesson—two lessons, in fact—and must leave the thing alone in future. Was he so bent on matrimony as to be ready to espouse "the Plague or the Earthquake" rather than remain single? Miss Cartrew was herself an old maid, and ought not to talk reckless nonsense of this kind to one whose philosophy was so well approved. And then the married men of his acquaintance, even when they had beautiful



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wives and delightful children, were never entirely enviable. Did not all of them, without exception, intensely enjoy a change from their blissful domestic surroundings? Bah! the happiness resulting from the whole institution of marriage was exaggerated.

And somewhat thus I remember consoling myself under an enduring sense of defeat. My revenge was a simple relapse into rudeness. I neither called to say good-bye to Lady Oakton, nor wrote to say that I was going abroad.

And so I passed the autumn with no news from England. Three months' expatriation, however, had only increased my appetite for more. Under the weight of my wrongs and contumely a winter in London amid my customary surroundings was not a smiling prospect. The wild man in me must still be fed and petted. When a man has been offended by a woman, if he cannot quarrel with her, he can at least avoid her. Lady Oakton may have marked me (as farmers mark silly sheep) as her own, but I would obliterate the humiliating brand. "Lady Oakton's young man!" All my associates recognized the mark.

My friend the old Burcastrian had much of the Ulysses spirit, and a yacht and much wealth wherewith to gratify it. He invited me to join him for a prolonged cruise in the Mediterranean, and I accepted it with gratitude.

Before starting I ran down to Burchester to see

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Dorothea, and my interview with her still further drove me to throw off the bondage.

After wondering, with a faintly aggrieved expression, whether I "was ever going to settle down to anything," she proceeded to tell me the news.

She had seen Lady Oakton, who was surprised at my odd conduct, which she described as a very singular exhibition after the pains she had given to my social education.

"I always thought your brother the most amiable of men, but now——"

Dorothea imitated Sylvia's manner and gesture with accuracy.

"And what did you say, Dolly?" I asked.

"What could I say but regret you are so ungrateful? Lady Oakton was really annoyed, and I hope you will take the first opportunity of making your peace. She is the one woman whom you cannot afford to quarrel with."

"Perhaps I found her patronage a little irksome," said I.

"Nonsense," answered my sister. "Urban"—Urban was the canon as he appeared in domestic circle—"says she is the best-bred woman he has ever met. She was most kind to us when we saw her a few days after your erratic departure, and invited Donald, little Urbie, and Mary, and baby, if we would let him go, to take tea with Cecil in Portman Square. The children enjoyed themselves





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very much, and Cecil was a darling. Mary is always talking about Cecil. He took a great fancy to her."

"Naturally," said I; "Mary is very pretty. Just like you were at her age."

"I think she is, a little. But if she has my eyes, she has Urban's profile. Don't you think so?"

Yes, I thought so.

"When I called next day to thank Lady Oakton," resumed Dorothea, "she talked of you, and said what a pity it was a man of your abilities——"

"I can quite imagine the conversation," said I, I am afraid a little rudely, "but how was Lord Oakton?"

"Well, do you know, I think Lady Oakton is rather troubled about him. The last time I saw him he was very odd, and Lady Oakton had to tell him who I was! Then he spoke quite nicely of poor papa, and feared he must have been a 'pretty handful.' He asked about you, and wanted to know how it was you were not married. I told him you had gone to Norway to shoot and fish. Then he laughed—that peculiar little laugh of his with something sly in it—and wondered whether your unannounced departure was in consequence of some '*affaire du cœur*'—'do koor,' he pronounced it—because even old bachelors had their moments of weakness. At least that is what he meant, but he put it a little more coarsely.

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But I said you were evidently intended for an old bachelor by nature——”

“By nature, Dolly! By culture, you should have said. I’m like you, the child of circumstance, only we have been pushed into different spheres of usefulness. But have you heard anything of Miss Cartrew?”

“I don’t think Lady Oakton sees much of Miss Hayward now. She may be good-looking, but she is a little dull, at least compared with Lady Oakton.”

“The comparison is trying for the most brilliant of us, Dolly.”

“No doubt; but, after all, Miss Hayward is a little dull. But they do say her heart was broken, and of course that will account for it.”

Dolly looked at me to note the effect of her words, but I accepted them with the same composure as armour-plate receives a charge of buck-shot, so she proceeded—

“Urban met Miss Cartrew at a *soirée* or something at the Geographical Society, and she introduced herself to him. He dislikes her very much, and says she is quite a Free-thinker. It appears she wanted to see you very much, but Urban could tell her nothing about you, because you know you did not even leave your address.”

“True. That was an oversight. Where is she?”

“She has gone abroad for ever so long, I don’t



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know where, and taken her niece with her. But come into the nursery and see the children."

Dolly had evidently had enough of my affairs.

A quarter of an hour in the Frampton-Joneses nursery made me fully conscious of the value of a bachelor uncle in a ruddy, vigorous, and expanding family. Miss Hayward and the Fates seemed to be manœuvring together with the joint object of its protection.

But I was fond of the children, and hoped in secret that they would not grow up too much like their papa, and glory in a profile and a clear clerical utterance, a danger of which there were ancestral risks.

I parted from Dorothea affectionately, and smiled quite amiably on my brother-in-law, when he told me that "they still had hopes that I might yet distinguish myself in the world." On the next morning I went down to Southampton, where the yacht was lying, and in the afternoon we steamed down-channel in a thick haze. In the bay we fell in with some heavy seas, and passed through a period of extreme shaking and dampness. But off Cape St. Vincent the warm airs of the Gulf Stream brought us halcyon calms, and we landed at Gibraltar in brilliant sunshine.

But changing weather, blue skies, and bluer seas, distant lines of snow-capped mountains leave only faint impressions on a diary devoted to the record



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of emotions, and it was not until the beginning of February that a letter, written to my London address, by Miss Cartrew, from a Nice hotel, recalled me from the mental indolence a constantly changing scene produces.

"DEAR MR. BLAKE," wrote Miss Cartrew, "A rumour has reached us that you are yachting in the Mediterranean. There is, therefore, a prospect we may see you before the winter is over. I trust we may. Evelyn and I have talked a good deal of you lately. She unites with me in kindest regards."

This was all. Was it a signal to try again? What the deuce had Evelyn and her aunt said about me?

The hint was a broad one, and so I took it.



### CHAPTER XXXIII

MISS CARTREW'S letter reached me at Suez, where I left the yacht, caught a steamer for Marseilles, and from thence hurried on to Nice, which I reached on a dismal rainy day. The palms dropped their leaves disconsolately, the sea was a lifeless and leaden grey. The Maritime Alps cut the opaque sky with shadowy unsubstantial summits. The Promenade des Anglais was as dreary as Wandsworth Common on a November afternoon.

Miss Cartrew's letter was more than a month old, and she had quitted the hotel from which it had been written for Bordighera. Thither I followed her, to discover that she had moved on to some unknown destination beyond Genoa. I found Genoa, lording it over her port, enthroned on her hills, but scourged by a bitter wind that set the "dust-devils" dancing on all the Piazzas. Here my search was crowned with success, for I learnt that Miss Cartrew had taken a villa somewhere in the steep region lying between Rapallo and Nervi.

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"Not more than three hours' drive from Genoa with two good horses," said the house-agent. "The lady has the Villa Emilia cheap," he added.

Then he laughed in serene enjoyment of a joke concealed from me.

"You seem amused," said I.

But he denied his mirth, and explained the reason of Miss Cartrew's bargain. A German merchant who had made a fortune at Milan, had built the villa for his Italian wife, and given it her name. She had, however, suddenly eloped with a former Italian lover, and thus the Villa Emilia had come into the market.

Was it a tragedy or a comedy which had stirred inside its walls and fluttered across the trailing roses? Some ignoble story of commonplace weakness with a greasy dash of fun, or a story of human frailty redeemed by the dignity of an overmastering passion?

The house-agent thought it a good joke because the victim of it was a "*Tedesco*," but it did not seem of happy augury for my own loves.

I drove along the winding hilly road that overhangs the sea, on a glorious March morning. The mountain blasts which had vexed Genoa on the day of my arrival were cradled in the mountain snows, and the sun bit my cheeks through the clear atmosphere.

The villa was high up above the road leading



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to Spezzia, in a steep and narrow valley, through which a stream, swelling in heavy rains to a furious torrent, had cut a jagged way. The patches of turf among the tumbled rocks were fragrant with violets and primroses, and bright with innumerable anemones. The German had fixed on a noble site for his bride's dwelling. Above the villa rose the mountain-slopes in terraced tiers of olives, and orchard trees in flower. Here and there, the dark-green of stately cypresses broke the quiet grey-greens of the olives. At the end of the gorge was the sea, calm and blue, except where the swell made a swirl of foam over a reef of rocks. On the western angle of the coast, clinging to the cliff like a fungus, stood a squalid Italian village, which lived in its own streets for warmth, and owned an ornate church several sizes too big for it, and out of all proportion to its population and religious fervour.

This was the prospect revealed to me from the carriage on the steep and winding road. I recall it vividly, just as I recall the Sussex woodland scene that served as the background for my defeat in England.

"Surely," said the cynic voice within, "you must want to be married very desperately to take so much trouble about it."

A winding road is a box of surprises. Not even the driver, who gallops his horses round the

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precipitous corners, cracking his whip with inexhaustible energy, knows what fate has prepared for him at the next curve. Round the last I discovered Miss Cartrew, tapping a sinister-looking rock with a hammer. The jangling bells and the cracking whip interrupted her geological studies.

I stopped the carriage and got out.

"So you have come!" said she.

But when I told her that I had delayed so long because I had come so far, I fancy she regretted her letter.

"It is," she said, "a long journey. But of course you will stay up at the villa."

"But Miss Hayward may find me an inconvenient guest."

"Bother her! Drive back to Genoa after lunch and bring over your things."

Then she got into the carriage, and we drove up to the Villa Emilia.

In the garden—a beautiful garden with magnificent evergreens, groups of waving eucalyptus, and sunny patches of orange and lemon-trees—Evelyn Hayward stood watching the hurried rush of the green lizards, which she frightened from their hiding-places under the box borders. She was looking very lovely; but after a sea voyage with no ladies on board, even plain women, when they are young and healthy, are attractive; my appearance left her quite unruffled.





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I commenced by explaining untruthfully that hearing Miss Cartrew had taken the Villa Emilia, and chancing to be at Genoa, I had driven over to say "how d' you do."

Miss Hayward replied that she had heard that I was yachting in the Mediterranean, and wondered whether I agreed with her that the lizards were very charming little creatures.

When Miss Cartrew went indoors to tell the servants there was a guest to lunch, an awkward silence fell on us, which even the lizards did not help to lighten, although "their tails came off if you touched them."

I wondered why the garden should be so old and the villa so new, and learnt that the house had been rebuilt on the site of an older one, badly shaken by an earthquake ten years before.

"It has not been blessed," I observed.

"I see you have heard that commonplace story of an ill-assorted marriage," she said.

"Yes, only it had a more definite sequel than usual," I answered.

Evelyn reflected a moment, and moved off from the subject as one unmeet for further discussion, but the conversation could not escape from the embarrassment of our last meeting. Neither of us spoke of Lady Oakton, and both of us were, I think, relieved at the summons to lunch.

I drove back to Genoa in the afternoon, and on



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the following morning returned with my port-manteau as Miss Cartrew's guest. Life, half way up a mountain, even in a charming villa on the slopes of the Ligurian hills, needs the solace of society, and I think Miss Hayward appreciated the change which even the presence of a rejected lover brought.

"It is a comfort," said Miss Cartrew, "to have a man about the house. Pray smoke all over it, Mr. Blake."



## CHAPTER XXXIV

THEN there followed a peaceful week. Miss Cartrew geologized among the rocks or botanized along the edge of the torrent bed, discovering ten—or was it fifteen or five?—different species of ferns in the valley. Miss Hayward and I climbed high up the thymy mountain where the skylarks were carolling, and looked over the pale green olive-trees at the triumphant curve of the blue sea round the limits of the bay. And soon the first timidity of our meeting disappeared under the pressure of the narrow circle in which we moved in the Villa Emilia. Biologists talk wisely of the effect of environment on species. Were psychology an exact science, some startling discoveries might be traced to the influence of romantic surroundings on the softer emotions. There was something lyrical—there is no other word in my vocabulary to express it—in that delicious garden. To the clambering roses, the climbing heliotrope, to the odour and colour of the sunny life stirring there, the amiable armistice

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that sprung between Evelyn Hayward and myself seemed due. We looked across this gentle truce, avoiding by tacit consent trespass on those emotional areas of feeling which are stirred by the breath of a southern spring, and Miss Cartrew watched us with an approving eye. Perhaps a Roman augur might have felt something stirring behind the gracious calm, but not I. The quiet seemed unending. The fret and stir of the world only reached the Villa Emilia in a faint ripple, until the evening of the eighth day brought us the inevitable shock in the middle of dinner. Miss Cartrew's cook, I remember, had surpassed himself, and the excellence of the Chianti almost atoned for the absence of claret.

How well I recall that dinner! There is the dining-room with the painted ceiling, crowded with rollicking *Amoretti*, and infant attendants of Bacchus rioting in blue cloudland. The whole scheme of decoration, heavy with the Teutonic taste of the wife-abandoned owner, had become a satire on his matrimonial luck. The room was heavy with the scent of Marshal Niel roses on the table, and the pungent odour of the Mimosa blossom that stole in through the open window.

The dinner passed in profound and nerve-reposeful calm till the post arrived—always the exciting moment of the day at the Villa Emilia. Miss Cartrew's interest in British politics grew in



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proportion to her distance from London, and at that moment some question of foreign policy, now as much forgotten as last year's snows, stirred the country, so, although Pietro was still busy with his service, Miss Cartrew opened her three-days'-old *Times*. For a space she glanced over the big columns with calm interest.

"There appears to have been an exciting debate in the House of Lords," said she. Then suddenly her voice caught a startled wring, and she added: "What's this?" Then she read: "We much regret to announce the sudden and most untimely death of Lord Oakton, seventh Baron of Kynesford. His lordship had been ailing for several days, but was well enough to be present at the military steeple-chase at Kettlebridge on Saturday. On Sunday, however, he was very seriously indisposed, and unable to leave his bed. On Monday typhoid fever of a most malignant type developed itself, and his lordship died early yesterday morning."

Oakton dead, and dead for days! The thing seemed impossible. He was a year younger than myself. What had death to do with one who was always so full of clumsy truculent life? I could see him even then rolling down Piccadilly, shoulder-ing his way through the throng as though he held a mortgage on the pavement and was about to foreclose. What a short innings, and what a poor one! All the commonplace phrases death evokes

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were applicable to his fate. So little done ; yet so much left ! His heir—a beautiful boy of seven—his wife, the brilliant Sylvia. Fancy Sylvia a widow ! She always hated black.

The moonlit garden seemed a changed place, and haunted with a derisive whisper. We looked across the Marshal Niel roses in silence. I think the singular incongruity of Sylvia as a widow was uppermost in the mind of us all.

I spoke first, and said : “ There is time for me to be present at the funeral yet. Can I telegraph, Miss Cartrew ? ”

“ The office closes at half-past eight, but Pietro can take your message and transcribe it, if you write plainly enough.”

She pointed to a small writing-table in the recess, but I fancied I read something new—was it suspicion ?—in her glance.

Then, whilst I wrote the message in Roman letters, she and her niece spoke in low voices.

“ She will be like an uncrowned queen,” said Miss Hayward.

Then Miss Cartrew took a Tangerine orange and removed the skin with extreme care. Nothing could shake her granite calm. But her niece’s face had become thoughtful.

But the telegram was finished : “ Just heard sad news. Accept my deepest sympathy. Hope to be at the funeral.—OAKTON BLAKE.”



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I handed it to Miss Cartrew, who said: "You might make it shorter. They are less likely to muddle it."

But I gave it to Pietro as it was.

Evelyn left the room, and when we were alone Miss Cartrew said warningly: "Mr. Blake! don't let Lady Oakton make a fool of you any more."

I felt my face flush at this brutal shot.

"I owe everything to the Oakton family," I answered.

But she finished her orange with an unruffled countenance.

"The train leaves Genoa at 11.30," she said. "You must start from here at eight."

"Thank you," said I coldly, for the speech was rankling.

Then she left me to amuse myself with the Chianti flask, or, if I preferred it, the heady white Sicilian wine.

What a change! I could read Sylvia's past history in flashes. It was like glancing down the long straight avenues which let air and light into a beautiful dark wood, yet which leave the impenetrable thickets and their secrets unrevealed, and all the more inscrutable from the contrast.

In nearly all human thought which circles round the changes produced by death, the selfish view swings uppermost. How would Oakton's death affect me now his wife was free? I knew what



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Miss Cartrew expected of me and what humiliating doubts had sprung up in her mind. The grim woman evidently regarded me as a wavering creature, too vague of purpose to form resolutions, the plaything for any woman's caprice. Then I wondered what Evelyn thought of me, and what she expected.

In the drawing-room Miss Cartrew was reading the papers with immovable resolution, and Evelyn Hayward looking out on the garden. But there was a sense of dislocation in the air. From all the dark places Sylvia's face shone on me. The subtle likeness between the two women made me wish to see the absent one. Hidden somewhere in the dark column of the cypress a nightingale had begun to gurgle, but at intervals the irritable croaking of the frogs from a pool in the valley silenced his song.

"It is a batrachian parliament," said I, "discussing a warlike policy towards the mice."

Perhaps she felt this heavy pleasantry out of place, for she passed it by without smiling. In the silence which followed, we looked out on the moonlight. A small schooner was stealing across the broad path of light. Miss Cartrew, reminding us of her presence, rustled her paper; the frogs relapsed into silence, and the nightingale sang again.

Evelyn Hayward stepped slowly in the moonlit





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garden, and I followed her. We found a seat in the arbour, woven of trailing plants and creepers, roofed over with clambering roses and vigorous heliotrope. Down in the valley, still untouched by the slanting moonbeams, tinkled the stream. The garden, with the bird and the moonlight, was full of the spirit of romance. What a place for happy lovers! I had made up my mind that evening to again ask Evelyn Hayward to marry me, but the news had shaken a purpose which I knew she suspected.

The bird whistled and carolled jubilantly: "Sylvia! Sylvia! Sylvia! Sylvia's free! Free! Free! Free!"

Miss Hayward looked pensively before her, and listened, and, perhaps, heard what the bird said too. Under the shadow of the change, there seemed nothing for us to say, but at last she spoke.

"Let us be candid with one another, Mr. Blake."

"But are we not?"

"No, I'm not. I know why my aunt sent for you, and, perhaps, I can guess why you came. But since you have come, you may think—it is very difficult to say—but you have heard what happened to me, of my engagement and its ending, I mean."

"But that was more than four years ago," said I, the meaner spirit croaking at my elbow like the chorus of frogs in the pearly wake of the nightingale.

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"Yes, more than four years ago. But those three months of our engagement, before he went to India, were the happiest of my life. Nothing can ever make me so happy again. I would rather sacrifice anything than lose that memory. Then the nightingales used to sing in my heart."

As she thought of her polo-playing hussar, and perhaps compared his ardours with my lethargy, I could see the tears in her eyes, gathering in the moonlight.

"I pity you with all my heart," said I, half divining that she was using her memories as signals to send me on my course.

"I know more of you than you, perhaps, think, Mr. Blake," she resumed. "This is what I want to say. Whether, after what has happened, you still think you ought to repeat what you have already asked me, I do not know. But even if I had changed my mind, the thing would be a huge mistake. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, I understand you."

The nightingale sang of youth and spring, and other loves than ours, and there was a thread of bitterness crossing the placid night.

"I will make it right with my aunt. Go back to England, and marry Lady Oakton as soon as you can. At any rate, I can say that I am the only woman who has ever made her jealous. That heart of yours, 'burnt and scorched with service'



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—you'll remember the phrase—may serve your purpose yet."

The frogs croaked so loudly that the nightingale stopped. Miss Hayward's contemptuous voice was not on the side of the bird.

"And now, I think," she said, "I'll say good-night ; my love to Lady Oakton !"

I was on the point of speaking, but checked the forming phrase—a compliment to her generosity for giving me up !

Could she see my sluggish affections were swinging back like mad to their old focus ? She left me sitting in the moonlight like an awkward fool.

In the drawing-room Miss Cartrew's grim face met me.

"So it isn't any good ?" she said. "It seems a pity, and it's more than half your fault. There's nothing more unwholesome than this investigation of feeling. Listen to that bird ! There's no doubt about his meaning ; take a lesson from him."

"I would," said I, "but I've no voice."

I never knew what Evelyn said to her aunt, but was grateful that she had been generous enough to spare me a humiliating explanation.

## CHAPTER XXXV

I LEFT the Riviera in brilliant sunshine, and found Paris shivering under a tearing east wind, which, further on my journey, was churning the Channel into ugly cross seas.

Miss Hayward had shaken hands with me with all the friendly indifference a night's rest had restored, whilst Miss Carew parted with me as with one who had not come up to her expectations—a creature well-meaning, but weak of will. Who knows? Psychology helps a man but little in his own case. She may have been right. But suppose Miss Hayward had decided to marry me: should we have been happy with the ghost of the polo-player on her side of the bargain, and the memory of a hopeless passion on mine? It would have needed great resolution, with the shadowy deficiencies behind us, to add another soberly contented couple to the marriage statistics.

As I hurried to Kyneford I seemed to leave a faint but mean wake of humiliation behind me.

London, several degrees further plunged in despondency than Paris, was squatting beneath



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its canopy of smoke by the foggy river. The boat had been delayed, and I missed, in consequence, the fast train for Kyneford, and arrived there two hours later than I had anticipated. The porter carried my portmanteau to the 'Kyneford Arms,' where I ordered a fly to drive me to the churchyard. The old ostler knew me well, and guessed the reason of my coming. He assured me I should be in time, and, as he harnessed the horse, gossiped, with the cheerful resignation of his class, of a calamity near enough to his own interests to bring down all the front blinds in the village street.

"He were a good sportsman, were Lord Oakton," said the old fellow thoughtfully. "A spirited young chap too a' times. We shall miss him bad this side o' the county, for though he never said much, nor worritted much, he allus know'd a good horse when he see one. He weren't easy to get over, were Lord Oakton; like the old lord at that, only diffrently. I see him that very Saturday that ever was 'fore th' fever took 'im—looking pale, or yaller-like. 'Twas a nasty cold raw day too. He pulled up at the 'Arms,' and said, 'Robert,' says he, 'go in and get me a glass o' that cherry-brandy o' yours, for I'm nigh starved with cold.' Jes' like that, he ses it. His lordship was drivin' that new roan mare of 'is—a clipper, but a bit fidgety. 'Stan' still, ole gal,' ses he, as he drinks the brandy. An' to think that he's gone! Dear! dear! Jes' about your age too, sir! 's lordship

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arst me what 'oss I fancied for the cup. 'Tea-pot,' ses I. 'Tea-pot!' ses he. 'Robert, you're old enough to know better. Take my tip, and lay your money on Flare-up.' But I'd backed Tea-pot for a dollar. But his lordship were right. Flare-up won by three good lengths, and now my dollar's in ole William's pocket. His lordship ought never to ha' gone to them races! But you know what he were like better than me. Go he would, and go he did."

But the last strap was buckled, and I soothed Robert's lament with half-a-crown.

The driver, who had been brushing a shabby tall hat in the coach-house, mounted on the box, and we drove soberly off to the little church in the Park, and found the funeral procession already gathered round the familiar Oakton vault under the yew-tree. The same low English sky drooped over the elm-trees, the same long line of tenants and dependents with solemn impassive faces, the same white-haired clergyman, the same group of villagers with clean wrinkled faces, filled up the picture as when my old benefactor was buried. Along the chief mourners were changed. He who now lay inside the coffin then stood at its head. The one pathetic sight was little Cecil standing by the grave, crying quietly, whilst the cold airs stirred his pretty curls, sole representative of his much-dwindled family. Here was the scene the touch of human tenderness needed.

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Sylvia had limited the mourners; not one of Oakton's cousins, whom her husband hated, stood beside the grave.

A sense of selfish melancholy, floating over the smell of the soddened graveyard grasses, hung above us. All reminded me that my days of idle prosperity dated from the last funeral there. Surely there must be something squalid in a nature when the sordid side of death obtrudes itself persistently on the reflections it evokes!

After the coffin had been lowered into the vault, and the dismal ceremony was over, Cecil, at a sign from his governess, turned from the grave and saw me.

"Mother knew you would be in time," he cried.

Already he was drying his tears, and sorrow beginning to heal itself.

Poor Oakton's death seemed an important loss to no one!

"Mother thought I was going to be ill too," continued the boy, still staying the procession to speak with me, "but it was only a feverish cold after all; wasn't it, Miss Frere?"

But the governess whispered to him to move on to the carriage, whilst I requested her to tell Lady Oakton that I would call at three on the next day, if she would see me.

Then I went back to the 'Kyneford Arms,' and spent a dreary afternoon after a dismal lunch, smoking by the fire. It was raining steadily; the

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village square, into which I had bawled to the crowd from that very window on the polling day, was silent and deserted. When I had seen it last it was blocked up with red-visaged voters.

I recalled what I had shouted, too. "Next time, gentlemen—and, believe me, it will be sooner than the other side expect—we will wipe out this victory—the Pyrrhic victory, gentlemen—which they are now secretly deploring."

What an ass I must have made of myself!

Evelyn Hayward had heard me, and so had Sylvia, who had encouraged me, but poor Oakton had laughed, and wondered what "the doose I meant by a Pyrrhic victory."

The rapid journey and the almost unlamented funeral, had made a murky confusion in my mind, and thrust spectral feelers into my dreams that night.

But my resolution was formed, I think, in spite of myself. No note came from Kyneford, and so, with feelings of mixed curiosity and diffidence, I started thither on the following afternoon. Till Cecil came of age his mother's rule would be supreme. I remembered my last meeting with Sylvia, and her half-passionate words: "There are moments when a woman feels ready to exchange all she possesses for the one thing she misses most." In the ten years of her married life what had Sylvia missed most? Was it not the love which I had once given her, and which I could





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give again? The princess may stoop to the beggar at her gates when he has loved her all his life. For the princess was free and brave to disdain the traditions she had learnt to despise.

And so I walked across the park, endeavouring to forecast the coming interview. The footman in solemn mourning livery opened the door, and the silence within chilled me.

When I was a lad I used to picture Pyrrhus slaughtering Priam among these sham classic pillars. Was it the sense-congealing whisper of the coffin borne down the wide staircase yesterday that made the place so cheerless? What a change from the excitement of the election and a house full of noisy politicians with vibrating tongues! There was the billiard-room where I had urged Cecil Oakton to defy his father. To-day the weight of the son's coffin pressed on the father's lid. The girl, the cause of the quarrel, sat enthroned, mistress of a house of which her son was the sole surviving representative. And so the stately silence seemed filled with ghostly whisperings.

Time brings strange revenges. The human hand, grasping at everything, holds but little, and the stranger inherits us.

I followed the servant to Sylvia's rooms, the one redecored to suit her taste. The rest of the house still groaned under the pompous weight of the Georgian period; but her apartments, bright

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and luminous, shone with blue and green silks, the colour of forget-me-nots.

The colour of forget-me-nots !

But why not ? Even to have become what the half-penny papers call "a society leader," cannot destroy the memory.

The smiling and charming room with the flowers and the crackling of the wood fire made the first cheerful centre I had entered since leaving the Villa Emilia.

Sylvia rose to meet me, a half-restless, half-resolute look in her eyes, which I had seen in them only once before. She seemed taller and statelier than ever in her mourning. The hand she gave me was firm and cool.

"It was kind to leave pleasant quarters with dear friends in the south," she said.

"Kind ! Had I known sooner I should have been here earlier."

"What news from the Villa Emilia, Mr. Blake ?"

"None, Lady Oakton."

"None of interest to yourself or me ?"

"Miss Cartrew was botanizing."

"And Evelyn Hayward ?"

"She was looking on."

"She is still looking on ?"

"Yes."

"A rumour reached us that—well, that we were to congratulate you, Mr. Blake."

"Then it was a foolish rumour."

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Then the sense of tension seemed to slacken, and I blundered out the clumsy words of regret and consolation I came to say—words which, even when buttressed on sincerest feeling, carry with them the dull clang of formulas.

"Poor Cecil!" she said. "It was dreadfully sudden."

Then I heard the history of his illness, and its swift and fatal course. He had not even made his will.

"That was like him," said I.

"Ah! poor fellow! At his age there should be a whole life-time left for will-making!"

"You will have much to settle, Lady Oakton. All my time and all my services are yours."

"I shall not forget you are my oldest friend, Mr. Blake, although you did leave England for eight months without saying 'good-bye.' And that's so easily said."

She rose from her chair and approached the fireplace. In the chill light of the pale spring day I saw that her weeds could quench no single ray of the splendid beauty of her mobile face, and as I watched her, with the jealous memories pricking me, I mumbled my feeble excuses.

"No explanations, please, Mr. Blake," she said. "They are dangerous between us. We understand each other too well. You came across the map of Europe to poor Cecil's funeral."

"No," I said. "I came to try to comfort you!"

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How many years is it, Lady Oakton, since we were perfectly candid with one another?"

"Oh, very long. If we ever were perfectly candid."

"I was; you were not."

She saw the spark of kindling resentment, but let it quench itself.

"I always knew the world better than you," she answered.

"Because you loved it more."

"I atoned to you as best I could," she said meekly. Then, suddenly remembering, she added: "But we must not talk of these things now."

"Why not? Our duty is to the living, not the dead. You can be noble and generous, Sylvia. The princess must listen to the beggar-man at her gate."

And then as she stood against the fading light of the March day, I told her the perverse and feeble story of my heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

A little later, in a strange quiet dream, I walked back across the park, whilst the deer rustled over the dry ferns, and the wind hissed fitfully in the bare branches. I felt as one at the end of a long journey.

She had sent me away, but she had said: "Except little Cecil, there is no one but you in the world for me."

How the world will gasp and chatter round us six months hence when it hears!



## A PASSIONATE PILGRIM

Old tender fancies fluttered after me across the faint twilight of the lonely park like ancient refrains.

“Come to me in my dreams, and then  
By day I shall be well again!  
For then the night will more than pay  
The hopeless longing of the day!”

“Oh, little pink and white traitress!” So after all you came to me, and held out your white beckoning hands. After ten long years, though I could only reach them by stepping over a new-made grave. Well, the world's for the living, not for the dead, and selfishness is the law of life as well as the law of love.

I thought ambition died of atrophy in me, but now I feel its stirrings. What was it Miss Cartrew said of morbid introspection? “There is nothing more morally unwholesome than to investigate feeling.”

Perhaps she is right. When the beggar's hand is on the princess's crown he can close the record of his moods, and join the world of men who work instead of dream.

Yet, oh for the fresh, pure heart of ten years ago! Some victories are now too late. In how many triumphs does memory march wearing a crown of thorns?

THE END.

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